

My Love, I Am Here

A PRINCESS DELTA FRANCHESKA
AND HANS-DAVID STORY



My Love, I Am Here

A Novel

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Prologue: The Forest

The air smelled of crushed pine needles, damp earth, and blood.

Roots caught at Delta's skirts as she ran, each breath scraping her throat. The dense canopy narrowed the moonlight to pale ribbons that trembled across the moss. Behind them, hounds bayed and men shouted through the dark, their armor clinking beneath the crack of breaking branches.

Hans did not release her hand until they reached the hollow of a vast, gnarled oak.

"Stay here," he whispered, guiding her into the recess between the trunk and a wall of briars. His fingers lingered at her wrist for a heartbeat, his palm warm despite the cold. His chest heaved beneath his silver-embossed breastplate, and fierce resolve burned in his dark eyes.

"No." Delta caught the worn leather of his sleeve. Her crown was gone, her hair hung loose and tangled, and her pulse beat like a trapped bird. "Hans, come with me. We keep running together. We do not stop."

"The river bends back toward the northern redoubt, but they are too close." Hans raised her hand to his lips. The brief warmth of his kiss felt too much like farewell. "Stay hidden until you hear Mathew's whistle."

"Do not leave me!"

Hans answered by drawing his longsword. Steel sang against the scabbard as he stepped from beneath the boughs to face the trail behind them.

Torches flared between the black trunks. Armed men burst into the clearing, their blue coats bright beneath the rain. Hans met them with a roar that shattered the forest stillness. He fought without the polished ceremony of the palace yard. Every movement bought Delta another second.

Two men fell. More surged through the mist. An arrow flew from the darkness and buried itself high in Hans's left shoulder.

Delta could remain hidden no longer. She slashed the hand of a man reaching into the hollow, seized the broken shaft of a spear, and rushed into the clearing.

For three breaths, she and Hans fought back-to-back. Delta blocked a blade from his wounded side while Hans guarded the spaces she could not see.

Then Renaud drew a second dagger and threw it past her.

Hans stepped into its path. The blade struck beneath his ribs, and his body folded around the impact.

Heavy hands seized Delta from behind. She kicked and twisted as the broken spear was torn from her grasp.

Hans pulled the dagger from his side and forced himself upright. Blood spread across his tunic as he raised his sword and staggered toward Renaud.

Their blades struck once, then twice. On the third blow, Hans's wounded arm failed. Renaud knocked his sword aside and drove a narrow blade through the gap in his breastplate.

Hans fell to one knee. Across the blood-dark moss, he raised his head until his eyes found Delta's. His lips formed words she could not hear. Beneath his torn tunic, Fiona's stone ignited.

Golden light raced across the clearing and climbed Delta's outstretched hand as Renaud's men dragged her into the trees. She fought until the forest blurred around her, holding to one final image: Hans beneath the oak, the stone blazing against his heart.

Part One: Before the Fall

Chapter 1: Fiona's Last Promise

Twenty years before blood stained the forest, the royal chambers of Vonnfield smelled of burning myrrh, clean linen, and fading life.

Queen Fiona lay pale among satin pillows, her breathing shallow and uneven. Winter wind rattled the leaded windows, but a steady light filled the bedchamber. An oval stone rested upon the queen's swollen belly, no larger than a pigeon's egg. It was neither diamond nor sapphire, but a crystal that seemed to hold captive starlight.

King James knelt beside the bed, his strong hands trembling around her cold fingers. His crown lay forgotten on a nearby table. Here, he was not a king but a husband watching the woman he loved slip away.

"James," Fiona whispered, her eyes drifting toward the rhythmic, sparkling glow against her body. A faint smile touched her cracked lips. "She is awake. She knows."

"Hush, my love. Save your strength," James murmured, kissing her knuckles, struggling to keep the crack of grief out of his voice. "The physicians say the birth is near."

"Strength cannot change what is written." With visible effort, Fiona placed her hand over his and pressed both their palms to the luminous stone. "Listen to me, James. Keep it safe. This is for Delta."

"For our daughter?" James felt a quiet vibration hum against his skin. "Fiona, what is this? Where did your family—"

"You must guard it until her time comes," she pressed, her gaze burning into his with desperate urgency. "Do not let anyone claim it. It belongs to her soul. Promise me, James. Promise me."

"I promise," James swore softly, bowing his head against her chest. "On my honor, on my life, I will protect it for our child."

Before midnight, the chambers rang with the strong cry of a newborn princess. The midwife wrapped the child in royal silk as Queen Fiona's eyes closed and her pulse faded into the winter night.

James gathered his daughter into his arms and wept into the velvet blankets. Inside his doublet, close to his heart, the stone had gone cold. It waited for the child to grow.

Chapter 2: The Angel Watching Over Her

Delta Vonnfield grew up surrounded by high granite ramparts, manicured hedges, and the enduring memory of a mother she had never known.

King James was never a distant sovereign to his daughter. However heavily state business weighed upon him, he set aside his ledgers each evening to sit beside Delta's bed. By the fire, he told her stories of Fiona—not only a queen of regal poise, but a woman who laughed without restraint, sang to nightingales, and brought warmth to the grand halls.

“Where is she now, Father?” five-year-old Delta would ask, hugging her knees to her chest, her dark hair tumbling over her nightgown.

James would brush a stray curl from her forehead, his eyes tender. “She is an angel now, my sweet. Watching over you from above the clouds, keeping watch when the castle sleeps.”

Delta spent hours at the tall windows of her bedchamber, searching blue skies and star-filled darkness for the stir of white wings among the spires. Her longing to know Fiona settled quietly inside her and set her apart from the other children at court.

After Delta fell asleep, James would unlock the hidden mahogany drawer beneath his desk. Fiona's stone rested there on black velvet. It remained dark, yet whenever he touched it, a faint crystalline note sounded from within, recalling him to his oath.

Chapter 3: She Is an Angel Talking

The sun shone warm on the rose maze of the lower palace gardens when eight-year-old Hans Fouler first set foot within the royal grounds.

His father, Phillip Fouler—a towering man with scarred knuckles and the silver mantle of Chief Royal Knight—strode toward the council chambers. Hans followed in a crisp linen tunic and leather training boots, a wooden practice sword at his hip.

A clear, musical voice drifted across the courtyard.

Beyond an archway woven with honeysuckle and white gardenias, a little girl stood beside a stone fountain. She wore a simple rose-colored dress, her dark hair tied with a silk ribbon. A bluebird perched on the fountain's rim, and she spoke to it with grave concentration, gesturing with small hands as her dark eyes shone in the morning light.

Hans stood frozen, wide-eyed, completely transfixed.

Phillip paused several paces ahead and turned back, frowning at his son's abrupt stop. "Hans? Come along, boy. The King expects us."

Hans did not move. He pointed a small, solemn finger toward the archway.

"What are you doing staring into the private court?" Phillip asked, stepping back to take his son's shoulder.

"Look, Father," Hans whispered, awe rounding his voice. "She is an angel talking."

Phillip blinked, looking at Princess Delta by the water, then down at his young son's earnest, rapt face. The rough knight let out a low, quiet sigh, shaking his head. "That is the King's daughter, Hans. Mind your eyes and your tongue."

As they continued toward the council chambers, Hans looked back three times. The sound of her voice and the brightness of her eyes had already taken root in his heart.

Chapter 4: The Princess and the Knight's Son

Hans soon found his way back to the garden, and Delta was not a child who wished to be admired from afar.

Within a week, courtly distance gave way to easy friendship. Beneath the willows of the palace orchard, Hans taught Delta to hold a wooden sword without pinching her thumbs. Delta stole warm berry tarts from the kitchens and divided each one precisely in half on a flat stone.

One afternoon, as they sat side by side on the marble balustrade overlooking the courtyard, swinging their legs, Lady Beatrice—a senior court governess with an ever-present scowl—swooped down upon them.

“Princess Delta!” the governess hissed, her gaze snapping toward Hans. She gripped the boy by the shoulder and pushed him back. “Master Fouler, you belong in the training barracks with the squires. And you, Your Highness—you should not speak with him, my lady. It is unseemly for the heir to the throne to consort with a knight’s son.”

Hans dropped his chin, his cheeks burning red with humiliation, preparing to bow and retreat.

Delta stood up immediately. Though she barely reached the governess’s chest, she lifted her chin with natural royal poise.

“Hans is not merely a guardsman’s son,” Delta stated firmly, her voice ringing clear. “He shared his wooden sword when mine broke, and he gave me the sweet half of the pear yesterday. He is my friend. You may return to the hall, Lady Beatrice.”

The governess gasped, flushed, and bowed stiffly before retreating in indignance.

When the governess had gone, Delta turned to Hans with a bright, conspiratorial grin. His shame dissolved into quiet wonder.

To the court, he was a subordinate's child. To Delta, he was simply Hans.

Chapter 5: Growing Together

Behind the neglected southern glasshouse, half-buried under creeping ivy and tangled briars, lay an abandoned inner courtyard that the estate gardeners had long forgotten. Together, over weeks of stolen afternoons, they had reclaimed it. They cleared the broken slate pavers, cut back the choking vines, and coaxed the wild white roses along the crumbling brick trellis.

Beyond that rusted iron gate, the world demanded its titles. Outside, she was the poised, untouchable young mistress of the estate, and he was the silent, disciplined sentinel sworn to keep his distance.

Inside the garden, the armor fell away completely.

On an evening when the scent of impending rain hung heavy in the cooling air, the weight of the court had finally broken her composure. Delta sat on the low stone bench, her head bowed in her hands, her shoulders trembling with the crushing exhaustion of playing the flawless heir to a lineage that showed no mercy.

Hans did not bow. He did not maintain the safe, mandatory distance demanded by his station. He crossed the mossy stones, stepped into her space, and knelt directly before her on the stone pavers.

“You don’t have to wear the mask here,” he said softly.

Delta let out a ragged, bitter breath, refusing to lift her face. “Everyone expects Delta to be iron. Unyielding. Flawless. If I break for even an instant, they tear away whatever is left.”

Hans reached up, his calloused fingers gently cradling her jaw, lifting her face until her gaze had no choice but to meet his. His voice dropped low, steady and unshakable, cutting through the storm inside her head.

“Look into my eyes,” Hans murmured, his thumb softly tracing the curve of her cheek. “I see you. I’m not leaving you.”

The quiet between them became absolute. The turmoil in her chest ceased, anchored entirely by the unwavering warmth in his steady gaze. She leaned into his touch, her hand coming up to rest over his wrist, her voice barely louder than a whisper, fragile yet fiercely resolute.

“Only between us,” she answered.

“Only between us,” he agreed, leaning in until his forehead gently rested against hers, shielding her from the entire world. “They only see the title. But I know you, Francheska.”

The name hung between them like a sacred vow. To the halls of power, she would forever be Delta. But here, enclosed by white roses and stone, she was Francheska—known, guarded, and wholly loved by the only soul who saw behind the veil.

Chapter 6: A Knight's Son

By his eighteenth winter, Hans had grown tall and broad-shouldered, unmatched among the squires with a broadsword. Manhood, however, brought the realm's rules down upon him with new weight.

In the armory one evening, Phillip Fouler watched his son methodically oil a silver-plated cuirass. The older knight placed a heavy hand on Hans's shoulder, forcing him to meet his gaze.

"You carry yourself well with a blade, Hans," Phillip said gravely. "You have honor, courage, and loyalty. But I see the way your eyes follow the princess."

Hans froze, his cloth pausing on the steel.

"Delta is the future ruler of this kingdom," Phillip said. "You are a knight's son. Your duty is to die for her crown if called upon, but you can never share it. Love across that divide is treason in all but name. Forget your place, and you will destroy you both."

Hans swallowed hard, feeling the cold weight of his father's words. "I know my duty, Father."

Late that night, beneath the stone ceiling of the barracks, Hans admitted what duty could not undo. He loved her. He had loved her since the morning she spoke to a bird beside the fountain, and no law of rank or blood could change it.

Meanwhile, Duke Fortier's influence spread through the royal court. King James's adopted cousin, brought from France into the royal household years earlier, Fortier possessed title and privilege but no Vonnfield blood. Polished, soft-spoken, and unfailingly deferential, he stood at James's councils with an obedient bow and a reassuring smile. No one saw the cold ambition with which he watched the king and his heir.

Chapter 7: Delta's Personal Knight

On a brilliant spring morning, before the gathered nobility in the Great Hall, Hans knelt before the throne.

King James touched the flat of his ceremonial sword to each of Hans's shoulders. "Rise, Sir Hans Foulter. By virtue of your skill, your lineage, and your unyielding loyalty, I appoint you personal protector to Princess Delta Vonnfield."

Hans stood, turning to face Delta.

She sat near the throne in sapphire silk, her gaze locked onto his. Hans lowered his head in the formal, rigid salute required of the royal guard. He wore the silver cloak of her sworn shield, a position that placed him at her side through every banquet, council, and promenade.

The appointment was both blessing and torment. Hans stood close enough to catch the jasmine in her hair and read each flicker of sadness or joy in her eyes, yet honor forbade him to reach across the divide. Formality became its own armor. In public, she was Your Highness, and he was Sir Hans.

Delta felt the same divide closing around her. At banquets, she longed to turn toward the boy who had once shared fruit with her in the dirt. She loved him with an intensity that frightened her, but kept the words behind her teeth, waiting for a sign that they might cast the court aside.

Chapter 8: The Stone Entrusted

Late one evening, King James summoned Hans to his private study.

The king looked weary, the lines around his eyes deeper than they had been only months before. Once the oak doors were bolted, he opened a corner cabinet, removed a velvet-lined ebony box, and set it on the table between them.

He opened it. Inside lay the sparkling stone Fiona had left behind, pulsing with soft, iridescent light.

“Sir Hans,” James said, “this stone belonged to Queen Fiona. On the night she died, she commanded me to keep it for Delta.”

Hans stared at the object, sensing a quiet power radiating from its crystal facets. “Why show this to me, Sire?”

“Because the palace winds are shifting, and I no longer trust the shadows in these corridors.” James placed the box in Hans’s hands. “I do not understand the magic within this stone, but it is bound to Delta’s destiny. Protect it as you protect her—with your life.”

The weight of the charge settled over Hans. He bowed and closed both hands around the box. “On my blood and breath, Your Majesty, it will never fall into the wrong hands.”

Hans fashioned a concealed leather pouch beneath his tunic, keeping the stone close against his ribs, guarding Delta’s birthright day and night.

Chapter 9: Angels in Your Eyes

In the warmth of their secret, jasmine-draped terrace, the formal world retreated.

Hans sat on the low stone bench with a lute across his knee. His fingers drew out a tender melody that drifted into the evening air.

Delta leaned against the ivy-covered parapet, listening with closed eyes. “I have not heard that tune in the Great Hall, Hans. What is it?”

“It is... something I have been working on,” Hans answered quietly. He cleared his throat, his gaze drifting to where the twilight caught the edges of her hair. With a gentle, melodic voice, he began to sing the verses he had spent months crafting:

*I saw the light beneath the skies,
A gentle spark that never dies,
The heavens spoke in soft surprise—
I saw the angels in your eyes.*

Delta opened her eyes. The melody was pure and aching with unspoken longing. She stepped closer, humming the chorus until her clear voice joined his.

As their voices blended under the budding stars, Delta looked down at his face. She saw the way his fingers trembled slightly on the strings, the quiet intensity burning in his dark eyes, and the words echoed in her mind: I saw the angels in your eyes.

A sudden realization struck her like a bloom of warmth in her chest.

This is no idle palace ballad, she thought as her heart quickened. He is singing about me.

Chapter 10: The Confession Inside the Song

The final chord dissolved into the garden. Delta stood before him as the breeze stirred the hem of her gown. The stoic knight's mask had fallen away; Hans looked up at her as the boy who had once called her an angel.

"Hans," she whispered, her voice unsteady. "The lyrics... where did they come from?"

Hans set the lute on the bench and rose. He took half a step toward her, and the narrow space between them seemed alive with all they had not said.

"They came from the first day I saw you," he said. "You were speaking to a bird beside the fountain, and I told my father an angel was talking. I have never seen you any other way."

Tears stung Delta's eyes as joy and relief broke through years of restraint. She had loved him through every season, every stolen conversation, every silent vigil. Still, the discipline of her upbringing held her motionless as she waited for him to cross the final distance and speak the words plainly.

Hans reached out, his hand hesitating in the cool air before his fingertips gently brushed the side of her face.

"Francheska," he murmured, his voice trembling. "I..."

The heavy iron latch of the terrace gate clattered violently.

"Princess Delta!" a herald's voice echoed down the outer corridor. "The King calls for you in the solar! The Duke Fortier is presenting the evening dispatches!"

Hans snatched his hand away and resumed the rigid stance of her sworn guard as the door opened. The moment broke apart.

Delta looked back at Hans, her heart aching with the weight of the missed confession. Hans lowered his head in formal deference, his eyes veiled behind the duty he wore like chains.

Neither of them knew that the words left unspoken that night would become the sharpest blade when darkness came to tear them apart.

Part Two: The Poisoned Crown

Chapter 11: The King's Illness

The summons came before dawn.

Delta woke to a fist striking the outer door of her chambers and the frightened whisper of her maid. For one disoriented moment, she was still in the garden beneath the budding stars, listening to the last chord fade from Hans's lute. She could still feel the nearness of his hand against her cheek and hear the unfinished word trembling between them.

Then the maid said, "It is the king, Your Highness," and every other thought vanished.

She crossed the palace without waiting for her attendants to finish dressing her. The eastern corridors were blue with early light. Servants pressed themselves against the walls as she passed, their faces pale, while somewhere below the royal apartments a physician called sharply for boiling water.

Hans was already outside the king's bedchamber. He wore the same dark uniform he had worn in the garden, though the silver sash now lay straight across his chest and the tenderness of the night before had disappeared behind the discipline of her sworn guard. Only his eyes betrayed him. They moved over her face as if assuring themselves she was unharmed.

"What happened?" Delta asked.

"His Majesty collapsed in the solar," Hans replied. "The night steward found him beside the writing desk. Duke Fortier has been with him since."

The name unsettled her, though she could not yet have said why.

Inside, the heavy curtains had been drawn against the sunrise. The room smelled of hot linen, beeswax, and the sharp herbs simmering over the fire. King James lay buried beneath the carved canopy of his bed, one hand clenched over the coverlet. His face,

usually ruddy from the hunt and council chamber, had faded to the color of old parchment.

Two physicians bent over him. One counted the king's pulse while the other examined his eyes by candlelight. James shivered despite the sweat shining along his brow.

Fortier stood at the bedside holding a silver cup.

He looked composed in a dark blue coat, his hair neatly tied, his expression arranged into solemn concern. Anyone entering the room would have seen a faithful kinsman keeping vigil. Delta saw how firmly his fingers enclosed the cup.

"Princess," he said, stepping between her and the bed. "You should not see your father in such distress. The physicians believe it may be a wasting fever. He requires quiet."

"He requires his daughter."

Delta moved past him before courtesy could become a barrier. She sat beside her father and took his hand. His skin was burning, but his fingers felt strangely weak within hers.

"Father?"

For several breaths he did not respond. Then his eyelids lifted.

"Little bird," he murmured.

Relief tightened Delta's throat. He had called her that since she was small enough to hide behind his council chair.

"I am here." She pressed his hand to her cheek. "What hurts?"

James tried to answer, but a violent spasm seized him. His body arched against the pillows. The physician caught his shoulders while Delta held fast to his hand. When the seizure passed, the king lay gasping, his pulse fluttering beneath her fingertips like a trapped moth.

Fortier came forward with the cup. "The cordial, Your Majesty. It eased you before."

At the sound of his voice, James's fingers tightened faintly around Delta's.

Fortier slipped an arm behind the king's shoulders and brought the silver rim to his mouth. James swallowed twice before turning his face away. A thin line of dark liquid ran into his beard.

Delta caught its scent: honey, cloves, and something bitter beneath them, like crushed kernels left too long in water.

"What is in it?" she asked.

One of the physicians glanced at Fortier before replying. "Willow bark for the fever, Your Highness. Feverfew, honey, and a little valerian to help him rest."

"Nothing else?"

The physician hesitated. "Not in the draught prepared by my hand."

Fortier lowered the cup with a soft click against the bedside table. "I added a restorative sent from my estate. The same cordial used by my household for generations. His Majesty approved it himself."

His tone was mild, but the physician dropped his gaze.

Delta looked at her uncle. Fortier's concern remained flawless. Even so, a cold awareness moved along her spine.

"Then bring me its name and measure," she said. "The royal physicians should know everything my father is given."

A small silence opened in the room.

Fortier smiled. "Of course."

For the next six days, the illness tightened its hold.

James drifted between fever and confusion. At times he knew Delta and tried to speak of council matters. At others he stared beyond her, searching the room for Queen Fiona as if she had only just stepped outside. His mouth remained painfully dry. His pupils widened until only a narrow ring of blue remained, and his heartbeat raced, faltered, then raced again.

The physicians changed the poultices, opened the windows, closed them again, and argued in whispers over diseases none could name. Nothing helped.

Fortier never missed an evening dose.

He dismissed two longtime chamber servants for carelessness and replaced them with men from his own estate. He carried messages between the sickroom and the council, telling the ministers that the king wished ordinary business to continue under his guidance. Documents began to arrive already sealed. Guards Delta did not recognize appeared at the inner stair.

Each change was reasonable when considered alone. Together, they felt like a hand closing around the palace.

Hans remained outside the bedchamber whenever Delta visited. They had not spoken of the garden. There was never privacy enough, and grief made the memory of their interrupted confession seem almost selfish. Yet every time she emerged from her father's room, Hans was there. He did not offer empty reassurance or tell her the physicians would surely prevail. He simply fell into step beside her and matched his pace to hers.

On the seventh evening, Delta found her father briefly awake.

Rain tapped against the dark windows. The fire had burned low, and the bedchamber was empty except for one sleeping attendant. James turned his head when Delta sat beside him.

"They speak for me," he whispered.

"Who does?"

His brow furrowed as if the answer stood behind a curtain he could not lift. "Too many voices. Too many hands." He struggled for breath. "Do not let them choose your road while I sleep."

"I will not, Father."

The door opened before she could ask more.

Fortier entered carrying the silver cup on a small tray. The attendant woke at once and retreated to the wall.

"It is time for His Majesty's medicine," Fortier said.

Delta did not move from the chair. "Leave it. I will give it to him."

For the first time, Fortier's expression failed him. The change lasted no longer than a heartbeat, a hardening around the eyes, before concern settled over his features again.

"You have had no sleep, Princess. Let me spare you this duty."

"He is my father. It is not a duty from which I need sparing."

Fortier's gaze rested on her, measuring. Then he placed the tray on the bedside table.

"As you wish. Every drop, mind you. The physicians insist upon the full measure."

He remained near the door until Delta raised the cup. She touched it to her father's lips but allowed only enough liquid to wet them. James was too weak to swallow more. After several moments, Fortier gave a grave sigh and left to consult the council.

The instant the latch closed, Delta set the cup down.

James's eyes had already begun to lose their focus. His fingers twitched against the sheet. The pulse at his throat quickened visibly.

Delta lifted the cup and smelled it again. Beneath the honey and cloves lingered the same bitter trace. This time she saw a dark residue clinging to the inner rim, finer than the ground herbs in the physicians' usual draught.

She took a clean handkerchief from her sleeve, wiped the residue into its folds, and hid it inside her bodice.

When she stepped into the corridor, Hans read the truth in her face before she spoke.

He led her to the narrow alcove beside the chapel door, beyond the hearing of Fortier's new guards. Rainwater threaded down the colored glass behind him, turning the saints into wavering shadows.

"Something in the cordial is making him worse," Delta whispered. She showed him the folded handkerchief. "The physician did not prepare all of it. Fortier did."

Hans did not dismiss the thought as fear. He did not ask whether grief had clouded her judgment. His attention sharpened with the same quiet certainty he carried into battle.

“Who else knows?”

“No one.”

“Good. Keep it that way until we know what this is.” His voice softened. “You are not imagining it, Francheska.”

Hearing the private name steadied her. For one brief moment, the dark corridor became the garden again, and the words they had failed to finish stood between them. But her father’s labored breathing reached through the chamber door.

Delta closed her fingers around the hidden cloth. “I need the truth before Fortier gives him another cup.”

Hans rested one hand on the hilt of his sword. “Then we find it.”

Chapter 12: Fortier's Ambition

Fortier waited until midnight before locking the doors of his private apartments.

The palace had quieted, but it had not gone to sleep. Footsteps crossed the gallery beyond his walls as physicians and servants moved between the king's chambers and the kitchens. Every quarter hour, the watch bell sounded from the eastern tower. To anxious ears, it measured the length of King James's illness. To Fortier, it measured the closing distance to the crown.

He drew the curtains, opened the iron door of the brazier, and fed a folded paper packet into the coals.

The paper blackened first. Then the last dusting of dried nightshade curled in the heat and vanished into a thin gray smoke. Fortier watched until no fragment remained. He had learned patience from men who reminded him that privilege could be granted, but belonging could not.

On the writing desk lay the tools of his real work: council reports, guard rotations, letters sealed in red wax, and a chart of the roads leading south from Vonnfield. He sat before them and removed his gloves one finger at a time.

The royal household called him cousin when ceremony required warmth and foreigner when the doors were closed.

Born in France with no Vonnfield blood, Fortier had been brought into the royal household as a young man and accepted as King James's adopted cousin. He was given a title, an estate, and a place at court. He served with faultless manners and learned quickly that privilege and trust did not make him part of the royal line. Old lords praised his intelligence, then reserved the highest authority for those whose blood they considered legitimate.

He had smiled. He had waited. He had made himself necessary.

When harvests failed, Fortier found grain. When neighboring barons argued, he carried the king's terms between them. When the treasury weakened, he discovered which merchants could be frightened and which could be bought. James came to depend upon his calm voice in council, his precise memory, and his willingness to complete work other men considered beneath them.

Dependence, Fortier had learned, was merely power that had not yet announced its name.

He poured wine into a crystal glass but did not drink. Across the desk, the royal family tree had been copied onto vellum at his request. Gold lines descended through generations of kings until they reached James. From James, only one living line remained.

Delta.

Fortier traced her name with the tip of one finger.

The princess was loved in ways he had never been. Soldiers straightened when she entered the yard. Kitchen maids saved the best spring fruit for her table. Even the old ministers who doubted a woman's right to rule softened when she spoke of her father's people as though each life mattered to her personally.

That affection made her dangerous.

If James died and Delta stood before the council with the Sovereign Shield behind her, the crown would pass to her before Fortier could raise a legal objection. She was young, but youth could be guided. She was inexperienced, but experience could be supplied by loyal ministers. The kingdom would gather around her grief, and Fortier would remain what he had always been: useful, praised, and excluded.

He had not endured thirty years at court to bow to a girl who believed kindness could hold a realm together.

A quiet knock sounded at the inner door.

Fortier covered the family tree with a council ledger. "Enter."

Captain Renaud slipped into the room. He had exchanged his mercenary leathers for the blue coat of a palace officer, though nothing could disguise the old knife scar dividing his left eyebrow. Men like Renaud did not mistake employment for loyalty. That made them easier to trust than courtiers.

“The eastern stair is ours,” Renaud said. “The night watch captain accepted your purse. The two men who would not accept it have been reassigned to the river post.”

“And the king’s floor?”

“Six of my men among the household guard. Two more at the servants’ passage. Sir Hans Fouler still holds the princess’s door and follows her whenever she leaves her chambers.”

Fortier’s mouth tightened.

Hans had been a boy when Fortier first noticed the danger in him: not ambition, which could be purchased, but devotion. The young knight watched Delta as if her life were the single law he recognized. Men with one law were difficult to turn and impossible to frighten away.

“Do not challenge him yet,” Fortier said. “A loyal knight cut down inside the palace becomes a martyr. I want him isolated when the time comes.”

Renaud nodded toward the brazier. “How long does the king have?”

“Long enough to sign what I require. Not long enough to recover.”

The first doses had been small, hidden beneath valerian and cloves. Weakness could be blamed on age. Confusion could be called fever. By the time the physicians recognized that the symptoms did not belong to any ordinary illness, James’s body would be too exhausted to survive the cure.

It had been a careful design. Delta’s questions had made it less so.

Fortier remembered the way she had refused to surrender the silver cup. For a moment, she had looked not like a frightened daughter but like Fiona, still and watchful, seeing more than anyone intended to show her.

“The princess suspects something,” he said.

“Shall I confine her?”

“Not while the king still breathes. The court would ask why. The guard would ask louder.” Fortier lifted the wineglass and turned it slowly, watching firelight move through the red liquid. “Tomorrow evening, the royal ballet will proceed as planned.”

Renaud stared at him. “With the king dying upstairs?”

“Especially with the king dying upstairs. Half the council believes the realm is already collapsing. We will show them music, candles, and the princess in the royal box. Continuity comforts men who are afraid. While they applaud, I will learn whom they watch and whom they whisper to.”

“And the princess will agree to attend?”

“She will be told it is her father’s wish.”

It was almost true. James had approved the performance weeks ago, before poison turned his thoughts to smoke. Truth did not need to be invented when it could be trimmed to the desired shape.

Fortier uncovered the road chart. His finger followed the southern route from the capital, through the forest, to the royal country estate.

“When the king dies, panic will spread through the palace. A warning will reach Delta that the city is no longer safe. Someone she believes loyal will urge her to flee here.” He tapped the estate marked on the map. “Her carriage will never cross the southern bridge.”

Renaud studied the road. “Bandits?”

“Men wearing no colors. A broken carriage. Stolen jewels. A frightened horse found wandering at dawn. The kingdom will mourn a father and daughter in the same week.”

“And Fouler?”

Fortier looked again at the silver line of the southern road. “He will follow her. See that he does not return.”

Renaud gave a slow nod. “Once both are dead, the council names you king?”

“Not king.” Fortier allowed himself a thin smile. “Regent and Lord Protector. Grief must be respected. I will refuse the crown until the council begs me to preserve the realm.”

He could already imagine the chamber: the ministers exhausted, the army uncertain, the royal line extinguished. They would speak of stability. They would speak of sacrifice. They would place authority in his hands and congratulate themselves for choosing the only possible man.

Later, when the borders were secure and every command in the palace carried his seal, the crown would become a formality.

Renaud moved toward the door, but Fortier stopped him.

“There is one more matter. The princess removed something from the king’s room tonight. Search her attendants and watch the laundry leaving her chambers. Quietly. If she has kept the cup or any trace of its contents, I want it destroyed.”

“And if she speaks to a physician?”

“The physicians have families. Remind them.”

When the captain had gone, Fortier remained alone beside the dying fire.

He opened a drawer and removed two documents. The first transferred emergency command of the palace guard to the Duke of Fortier in the event that the king could no longer rule. The second authorized the removal of Princess Delta to the southern estate for her protection. Both awaited the king’s seal.

Fortier had spent his life outside the final door, listening to lesser men decide who belonged in the room. Soon every door in Vonnfield would open at his approach.

From somewhere in the royal wing came the muffled sound of a man coughing, followed by the hurried ring of a servant's bell.

Fortier folded the road chart, placed the unsigned orders above it, and reached for a fresh sheet of paper.

By morning, the palace would receive the announcement that the royal ballet must proceed in honor of the king's strength and the kingdom's peace.

By the following dawn, if all went as intended, Vonnfield would have neither king nor heir.

Chapter 13: The Royal Ballet

The great opera hall glittered as though no shadow had ever touched Vonnfield.

Three thousand candles burned beneath the gilded dome. Their light trembled across crystal chandeliers, mirrored pillars, and the jeweled throats of the court. Violins swept through the overture while dancers in white silk gathered behind a painted forest at the edge of the stage.

Delta sat alone in the center of the royal box.

Her father's chair stood empty beside her.

Fortier had ordered it left in place as a symbol of the king's expected recovery. To Delta, the carved oak seat looked like an accusation. While music rose toward the painted heavens, James lay fevered in a darkened room with poison working through his blood.

A narrow circlet pressed against Delta's temples. Her silver gown had been chosen to reassure the court: Vonnfield's heir calm, obedient, and visible. Below her, nobles glanced toward the royal box between every movement of the ballet. Whenever Delta met their eyes, they bowed and looked quickly away.

Fortier occupied the chair on her other side.

He applauded at the proper moments and leaned forward with the solemn attention of a statesman carrying grief gracefully. No trace remained of the hard look that had crossed his face when Delta took the king's cup from him.

"You see?" he murmured as the first dancers crossed the stage. "The court needed this. A kingdom cannot hold its breath outside a sickroom forever."

"My father is not a troublesome silence to be filled with music."

Fortier kept his gaze on the stage. "His Majesty approved this performance himself. It would have pained him to see fear cancel it."

The words were chosen carefully. Delta heard the lie inside their truth.

Hans stood behind the royal box with the other guards, one hand resting near the pommel of his sword. He wore full ceremonial armor, polished until candlelight ran across the steel. To the court he was motionless. Delta had known him too long to miss the tension in his shoulders.

Before they entered the hall, he had asked her quietly whether she truly wished to attend.

“Fortier wants me here,” she had answered. “If I refuse, he will know I am watching him.”

Hans had looked toward the closed doors of the king’s wing. “Then I watch him too.”

The curtain rose fully.

The ballet told the story of a white bird trapped inside an enchanted wood. Each time the creature tried to fly home, dark hunters drove it deeper among the trees. The audience admired the dancers’ impossible turns and the beauty of the painted moon. Delta could think only of a carriage road beneath real branches and the way her father’s hand had trembled around hers.

She had hidden the stained handkerchief inside a locked casket in the chapel sacristy. Only Hans knew where it lay. Without the name of the substance, it proved little, but Fortier’s sudden control of the guards proved more with every hour.

During the first interval, a palace messenger entered the rear gallery.

His boots were wet with rain. He crossed directly to Fortier and bent close to his ear. Delta could not hear the message, but she saw Fortier’s fingers close around the head of his cane.

“Has my father’s condition changed?” she asked.

The messenger looked at Fortier.

“No cause for alarm,” Fortier answered. “His Majesty is resting.”

“Then let the messenger tell me.”

The young man swallowed. “The king suffered another spell, Your Highness. The physician asks whether the evening cordial should be prepared.”

Delta rose. “I am returning to him.”

Fortier’s hand settled lightly over her wrist.

The gesture appeared affectionate to the court below. His fingers were cold and surprisingly strong.

“If you leave now, every lord in this hall will believe the king is dying,” he said beneath the applause. “Panic will reach the streets before we reach the palace. Sit through the second act. I will see that the physicians are answered.”

Delta looked down at his hand until he removed it.

“Send word that nothing is to be given without the royal physician present.”

“Naturally.”

Fortier spoke briefly to the messenger, too low for Delta to hear. The man bowed and departed through the private gallery rather than the main doors.

A moment later, Captain Renaud left his post beside the lower staircase and followed him.

Delta had seen Renaud twice in the palace that week, always wearing the blue coat of the household guard and always near men she did not recognize. Tonight the scar through his eyebrow made him easy to follow through the candlelit crowd.

The musicians began tuning for the second act. Courtiers rose to exchange greetings. Fortier turned to accept the concern of an elderly duchess, his attention divided for the first time all evening.

Delta glanced at Hans.

His eyes had followed Renaud too.

She touched two fingers to the silver bracelet at her wrist, a childhood signal between them: wait and watch. Hans's jaw tightened, but he gave the smallest nod.

Delta stepped through the velvet curtain behind the royal box as if seeking the retiring chamber.

The private gallery curved around the back of the opera hall. Music and conversation faded behind thick brocade walls. Ahead, Renaud's blue coat disappeared through an anteroom door.

Delta followed as far as the adjoining passage. The door had not fully closed. A heavy curtain concealed the narrow space between the anteroom and an unused musicians' gallery. She slipped behind it and held her breath.

Fortier's voice came from the room beyond.

He had reached the anteroom by another entrance.

"The dosage in the evening broth must be doubled," he said. The courtly warmth was gone from his voice. "The old man will not survive tomorrow's sunrise."

Delta's hand flew to her mouth.

She had expected deceit. She had feared poison. Hearing the sentence spoken so calmly made the world tilt beneath her feet.

Renaud answered, "The physician may refuse."

"He will not. His wife and sons are guests at your barracks until the king is dead. Remind him of their comfort."

A chair scraped across the floor.

"And the princess, Your Grace? She watches everything."

"By dawn, grief will make her easy to direct. A loyal servant will warn her that the capital is unsafe and urge her toward the southern estate. Let her believe escape is her own idea."

"The carriage?"

"Intercepted before the southern crossing. A tragic bandit raid. Take the jewels, burn the royal colors, and leave enough wreckage for the search party. Once she is gone, the Vonnfield line is extinguished.

The council will have no choice but to name me Regent and Lord Protector.”

Renaud gave a low laugh. “And her knight?”

“Fouler will die first. Make certain she sees it. Fear is more useful when it has a face.”

Delta’s nails bit into her palm.

For a heartbeat she saw Hans beneath dark trees, surrounded by men without colors. The image was so vivid that she nearly cried out.

She eased one step backward.

The heel of her slipper pressed against the tasseled cord hanging beside the curtain. A brass weight struck the wooden panel with a sharp knock.

Silence fell inside the anteroom.

“Who is there?” Fortier called.

Delta gathered her skirts and ran.

The door flew open behind her. Renaud shouted. Boots hammered across the gallery as Delta turned down the servants’ passage, nearly colliding with a startled dancer in feathered wings.

“Stop her!”

She tore the circlet from her head and flung it behind her. Metal struck stone. Someone cursed and stumbled.

The music of the second act began inside the hall, bright and triumphant, swallowing the first shouts of pursuit. Delta plunged down a narrow stair used by scene workers. Painted trees towered in the darkness beside her. Through a gap in the scenery, she saw the white bird dancing beneath false moonlight while the audience watched in enchanted silence.

At the bottom of the stair, two guards blocked the door leading toward the royal wing. They wore Renaud’s blue coats.

Delta turned before they saw her and crossed behind the stage. Ropes swung overhead. Dancers rushed past in clouds of white silk.

A stagehand opened a service gate to roll out a painted tower, and cold rain breathed through the gap.

Delta slipped outside.

She crossed the rear courtyard without a cloak, silver skirts dragging through puddles. The king would be poisoned before sunrise. Fortier's men controlled the inner gates. Somewhere behind her, Renaud was already shaping a story to explain her disappearance from the royal box.

There was only one person in the palace she trusted without proof, without title, and without fear.

Hans.

Delta ran toward the armory guardroom as the bells above the opera hall announced the beginning of the final act.

Chapter 14: Hans Believes Her

Delta burst into the armory guardroom soaked to the skin.

Three young squires looked up from the patrol ledger. Hans stood at the long oak table with one gauntlet removed, studying a page covered in fresh corrections. At the sight of Delta's torn silver hem and bare head, the restraint vanished from his face.

"Out," he ordered.

The squires hesitated only long enough to bow. Hans closed the door behind them, dropped the iron bar into place, and crossed the room in three strides.

"Are you hurt?"

Delta tried to answer, but breath would not come. Rainwater ran from her hair onto her shoulders. The opera music still thundered faintly through the walls, absurdly bright beneath the pounding of her heart.

Hans took her hands and turned them over, searching for blood. "Francheska. Look at me."

She raised her eyes to his.

"Breathe. You are safe in this room. Tell me what happened."

His voice gave her something solid to stand upon. Delta drew one ragged breath, then another.

"It is Fortier," she said. "He is poisoning my father. I heard him confess it. He ordered the evening dose doubled. He said Father will not survive the sunrise."

Hans went very still.

The words came faster now, each one tearing free. "Captain Renaud is helping him. They control the inner gates. After Father dies, they mean to frighten me into leaving for the southern estate. They will attack the carriage at the crossing and call it the work of bandits."

Her fingers tightened around his. "They said you would follow me. Fortier ordered them to kill you first and make me watch."

She waited for the questions any reasonable man would ask. Had she recognized the voices? Could grief have distorted what she heard? Was there a witness? She was a rain-soaked princess speaking of poison and murder while a ballet continued beyond the wall.

Hans's jaw set.

"I believe you."

The simple certainty broke something open inside her. Delta bowed her head, and for one dangerous second she wanted only to press her face against his chest and let him hold the fear for both of them.

Hans did not release her hands. "Did Fortier see you?"

"Not clearly. Renaud followed me from the gallery. By now they know someone was behind the curtain, and they will know I am gone from the royal box."

Hans looked toward the barred door. "Then we have minutes."

He guided her to the table. The patrol roster lay open beneath the lamp. Half the familiar names on the inner watch had been struck through and replaced in darker ink.

"I came here when Renaud left the hall," Hans said. "These changes were entered under Fortier's emergency seal. Men from his estates now hold the royal stair, the east gate, and both passages to the king's apartments. He has not declared a coup, but he has already placed one around us."

"We must reach my father."

"If we go to the king's rooms with no loyal guard behind us, Renaud will close the doors and claim you are overcome by grief. We will disappear before the court leaves the opera hall."

Delta knew he was right. Knowing did not make the choice bearable.

“I cannot abandon him tonight.”

“We are not abandoning him. We are bringing back the men Fortier cannot command.”

Hans crossed to a weapons chest and lifted its false bottom. Beneath spare sword belts lay the velvet-lined ebony box King James had entrusted to him. He opened it just far enough for the stone’s soft light to touch his face, then closed it and secured the concealed leather pouch beneath his tunic.

“Your father gave me Fiona’s stone because he feared the palace was no longer safe,” he said. “He made me swear it would reach you when the danger came. I think he saw this before either of us did.”

Delta stared at the place beneath his coat where the light had disappeared. Her mother’s final gift was within reach, yet there was no time to understand it.

“What can it do?”

“I do not know. The king did not know either. But Fortier will not have it.”

Hans buckled on his sword belt and pulled a dark traveling cloak from a peg. He wrapped it around Delta’s silver gown, fastening it beneath her chin so the wet fabric and royal embroidery disappeared.

“The northern redoubt remains under Commander Vale,” he said. “He served your father before I was born. Mathew is carrying dispatches there tonight. He knows the frontier paths, and he knows which companies still answer directly to the crown. If we reach them, we can return with enough loyal steel to take the king’s floor and arrest Fortier before dawn.”

“How far?”

“Less than two hours with fresh horses. Faster if the river road is clear.”

“And if the northern gate is already his?”

“Then we do what we have always done. We find another way.”

A fist struck the outer door.

“Sir Hans?” one of the squires called. His voice shook. “Captain Renaud’s men are searching the west gallery. They say the princess has been taken ill.”

Hans and Delta exchanged a look.

Fortier’s story had begun.

Hans lifted the bar only far enough to admit the youngest squire, a freckled boy named Elias who had trained under Phillip Foulter. He closed the door again.

“You saw nothing tonight,” Hans told him. “Go to the chapel. Take the small casket from behind the third panel of the sacristy and carry it to my father. Put it in his hands only. Tell him the king’s old fear has awakened.”

Elias’s face lost its color, but he nodded.

“Use the bell passage,” Hans continued. “If anyone stops you, you are fetching the chaplain for His Majesty.”

The boy bowed to Delta. “Yes, my lord. Your Highness.”

When he had slipped away, Delta asked, “The handkerchief?”

“If we fail to return, my father will place the evidence before the council. Fortier may control the doors, but he cannot silence every honorable man in Vonnfield at once.”

Hans extinguished the table lamp. Only the red glow of the forge remained, painting the armor racks like ranks of waiting ghosts.

They left through the narrow passage behind the shield cabinet, a route used by armorers to carry weapons to the lower yard. Hans moved first, testing each turn before drawing Delta forward. The space forced them close together. His hand remained around hers, warm and steady in the dark.

At the final stair, Delta stopped him.

“Hans.”

He turned.

The words from the garden rose inside her: the song, his trembling hand, the confession interrupted before it could become complete. If Fortier's men were waiting beyond the door, she could not bear to leave the truth unfinished again.

"What you tried to tell me last night..."

Hans touched his forehead to hers. The gesture was brief, fierce, and more intimate than any courtly kiss.

"I will finish it when your father is safe," he whispered. "That is a promise."

Delta closed her eyes. "Then you must keep it."

"With my life."

He opened the passage door.

Cold air rushed in from the lower courtyard. Across the rain-dark stones stood the royal stables and, beyond them, the road that led north.

Hans drew his sword halfway from its sheath and listened.

For the moment, the yard was silent.

Together, they stepped into the night.

Chapter 15: The Palace Chase

They had crossed half the lower courtyard when the first alarm bell struck.

Its iron voice crashed across the palace roofs. A second bell answered from the eastern tower, then a third from the gatehouse. Windows flared to life above them as servants threw back shutters and guards shouted from the walls.

Hans caught Delta's hand and pulled her beneath the covered walk.

A herald's voice rang from the upper gallery.

"Treason! The princess has been abducted! Sir Hans Fouler has taken the heir! Close every gate!"

Delta stopped in disbelief. "He is calling you my captor."

"It gives his men permission to kill me and call it a rescue." Hans looked toward the stable yard. The portcullis had begun to descend at the outer gate, its chains grinding overhead. "We move now."

They ran beneath the arches as armored men poured from the barracks. Some wore the old silver badge of the Sovereign Shield. Others wore the new blue coats Delta had seen at the opera hall. In the confusion, no one knew which command to obey.

"Your Highness!" an older guardsman called. "Step away from him!"

Delta threw back her hood. "Sir Hans acts under my order. Fortier has betrayed the crown. Open the northern gate!"

The guardsman faltered.

Captain Renaud appeared on the gallery above, one hand pressed to the stone rail. "The princess is distressed and not responsible for her words. Seize the traitor! Do not let him reach the horses!"

Blue-coated men surged forward.

Hans drew his sword. Steel rang against steel beneath the covered walk. He caught the first strike near the hilt, turned it aside, and drove his shoulder into the attacker's chest. The man crashed into a pillar. Hans swept the legs from a second without slowing.

"The stables!" he shouted.

Delta ran ahead. A guard reached for her cloak, but she twisted free and drove her elbow into his throat as Hans had taught her years before. The man recoiled, more surprised than injured. She seized a wooden practice staff from the wall rack and brought it hard across his wrist. His sword clattered onto the stones.

Hans looked at her once, fierce pride flashing through the urgency. Then three more men closed around him.

Delta reached the stable doors and found them barred from within.

"Open in the king's name!" she called.

No answer came.

She wedged the end of the practice staff beneath the iron latch and leaned with all her weight. The wood bent. Behind her, Hans drove one attacker into the rain trough and disarmed another with a blow from his pommel.

The staff split with a sharp crack, but the latch lifted.

Delta tore the doors open.

The stablemaster crouched inside with two frightened boys. "Forgive me, Your Highness. Captain Renaud ordered us to lock every stall."

"Saddle Ashwind. One horse, not two. We will be faster together."

The stablemaster stared past her at the fighting. Then loyalty overcame fear. He ran for the great black stallion at the rear of the stable.

Delta seized a bridle while the boys threw open the stall. Ashwind reared at the bells, iron shoes striking sparks from the floor. She

caught the reins close beneath his jaw and spoke into the animal's ear until he came down trembling.

Hans backed through the doorway, his sword red along one edge. A cut opened the sleeve above his wrist, but his hand remained steady.

"The gate is closing," he said.

"Then we do not wait for a saddle."

Delta led Ashwind into the rain. Hans sheathed his sword long enough to lift her onto the horse's bare back. He vaulted up behind her and closed one arm around her waist.

Renaud's men blocked the straight road to the gate.

Delta looked toward the hay carts standing beneath the granary awning. "The grain ramp."

Hans understood at once. He turned Ashwind sharply and drove him up the sloping boards used to unload wagons. Hooves thundered over timber. At the top, the granary passage crossed above the stable yard and descended beside the gatehouse.

A bolt shattered against the rail inches from Delta's hand.

Archers had taken position on the wall.

"Hold to me," Hans said.

Delta gripped his sword belt as Ashwind plunged down the far ramp. The portcullis was less than a man's height above the road and still falling.

At its winch stood the gate captain, a broad man in Fortier's blue. He raised his axe to sever the release rope.

Hans kicked free of the horse and landed hard on the wet stones.

"Keep him moving!" he shouted to Delta.

She caught the reins and bent low over Ashwind's neck.

Hans met the captain beneath the descending iron teeth. The axe struck his blade with enough force to drive him to one knee. He

rolled aside from the second blow, slashed the man's thigh, and seized the loose end of the release rope.

The captain grabbed Hans by the shoulder and hurled him against the winch post.

Delta turned Ashwind in the narrow space. The practice staff still hung through the strap of her cloak. She pulled it free and drove the broken end into the back of the captain's knee.

He collapsed with a roar.

Hans caught the rope and wrapped it once around the winch. The portcullis shuddered, stopping just above Ashwind's ears.

"Go!"

Delta urged the stallion beneath the iron spikes. Hans released the rope and sprinted after her as the gate crashed down behind him. He caught the horse's mane, planted one foot against the stone curb, and swung onto Ashwind's back while the stallion was already running.

A cheer rose from somewhere on the wall. One of the old guards had seen the princess fight for her own escape. The sound ended abruptly when Renaud ordered the archers to fire.

Bolts struck the road around them. One tore through Delta's cloak. Another grazed Hans's shoulder plate and spun away into the dark.

Ashwind galloped down the steep mountain road, iron shoes ringing against the cobbles. The palace loomed behind them, every tower alive with bells and torchlight. Delta twisted to look back.

The portcullis was rising again.

Riders flooded through the gate beneath blue-and-gold torches. Renaud had mounted at their head. Hounds strained against leashes beside the horses, baying into the rain.

"How long to the river road?" Delta called.

"If the bridge is open, half an hour."

A horn sounded from the northern watchtower.

Hans listened, and his arm tightened around her. “They have signaled the redoubt. Fortier will tell them I abducted you.”

“Will Commander Vale believe it?”

“He may not have time to decide before Renaud’s men reach him.”

The road narrowed as it descended toward the forest. Rain turned the cobbles slick beneath Ashwind’s hooves. Delta could feel the stallion’s breath laboring and Hans’s heart beating hard against her back.

At the final bend, they passed a lone scout riding toward the palace in the gray cloak of the northern companies. He pulled his horse aside as they thundered past.

For an instant, torchlight touched his young face.

“Mathew!” Hans shouted.

The scout’s eyes widened. He looked from Hans to Delta, then toward the armed pursuit descending behind them.

There was no time to stop.

Hans drew the short silver whistle worn by the Sovereign Shield and flung it onto the road at Mathew’s feet.

“For the king!” he called.

Mathew stared down at the whistle, then wheeled his horse toward the approaching column before anyone could see him pick it up.

Delta understood. If Mathew rode openly beside them, he would be hunted too. Among the pursuers, he might learn their orders or turn loyal men away from Fortier.

The last palace lights disappeared behind the ridge.

Ahead, the forest rose like a black wall beneath the storm. Ashwind plunged between the first pines. Branches clawed at Delta’s cloak, and the road dissolved into mud and shadow.

Behind them, the hounds entered the trees.

Their cries drew closer.

Chapter 16: Beneath the Tree

The forest swallowed the sky.

Pines closed around the road until even the storm seemed trapped beneath their branches. Ashwind ran through mud and standing water, his breath tearing from him in white bursts. Behind them, torchlight broke into fragments between the trees.

The hounds no longer sounded distant.

Hans guided the stallion off the main road and down a hunter's trail toward the river. Wet branches struck his armor. Delta clung to the horse's mane while the slope dropped sharply beneath them.

"The northern road is behind us," she called.

"They expect us to follow it. The river bends back toward the redoubt. If we cross below the falls, we can lose the hounds on the stones."

Ashwind stumbled.

Hans pulled him upright, but the stallion's next stride broke unevenly. One iron shoe had twisted loose on the descent. By the time they reached the riverbank, the animal was limping badly.

Delta slid to the ground. Hans dismounted beside her and lifted Ashwind's foreleg. The shoe hung from a single nail, and blood darkened the split edge of the hoof.

The baying rose above the rain.

"He cannot carry us farther," Hans said.

He tore the saddle blanket free, slapped Ashwind's flank, and sent him splashing downstream. The stallion hesitated, looking back once before disappearing through the trees.

"His scent may draw some of them away. Come."

They crossed the shallows on foot. Water surged around Delta's knees, numbing her legs through the ruined silk. Hans kept one hand beneath her arm and the other on his sword. Twice she slipped on

the black stones, and twice he caught her before the current could pull her down.

An arrow struck the water beside them.

Hans turned, shielding Delta with his body. Shapes moved among the trees on the bank they had left.

“Run!”

They climbed the far side and plunged into deeper forest. Delta no longer knew whether they moved north or south. The world had become rain, roots, and the pressure of Hans’s hand around hers.

A vast oak rose ahead, older than the palace walls. Lightning had split its trunk years ago, leaving a hollow hidden behind a curtain of roots and fern. Hans pulled Delta into the dark opening.

Inside, the earth smelled of moss and winter leaves. There was barely room for them to crouch together. Hans listened at the entrance while Delta fought to quiet her breathing.

Torchlight flickered through the trees and passed.

For several seconds, neither of them moved.

Then Delta touched the blood on Hans’s sleeve.

“You are hurt.”

“A shallow cut.”

She tore a strip from the lining of her gown and bound his forearm despite his protest. Her fingers shook as she tied the knot.

“We should have stayed at the palace,” she whispered. “If I had not followed Renaud, if I had not come to you...”

Hans caught her hands. “Fortier chose this. Not you.”

“He is hunting you because of me.”

“He is hunting me because I stood where I chose to stand.”

The certainty in his voice made her look at him.

Rain traced the edges of his face in the dim light. He had lost his ceremonial cloak, and mud streaked the silver of his armor. Yet to Delta he looked exactly as he had in the garden: the boy who had

watched her speak to a wounded bird, the knight who had carried her name in silence, the man whose confession still waited unfinished.

“Hans,” she said. “Do not make me wait until we return. Tell me now.”

His expression broke open with all the tenderness he had hidden from the court.

He lifted one hand to her cheek. “Francheska...”

A hound barked directly outside the hollow.

Hans drew his sword and pushed Delta deeper beneath the roots.

“Stay down. Do not come out unless you hear Mathew’s whistle.”

Delta seized his wrist. “Do not leave me.”

He bent and pressed his lips to her forehead.

“Look into my eyes,” he whispered. “I see you. I’m not leaving you.”

Then he stepped into the rain.

The first mercenary reached the oak with the hound straining at his side. Hans struck before the man saw him, cutting the leash and driving the flat of his blade across the man’s temple. The hound fled into the dark.

Two more soldiers charged from the trees. Hans met them beneath the branches, steel flashing white whenever lightning opened the sky. He fought without the formal beauty of the training yard. Every movement was short, brutal, and necessary.

Delta watched through the roots with her dagger clenched in both hands.

Hans drove one man into the river and turned just in time to catch a downward strike from another. Their blades locked. He twisted, broke the man’s grip, and sent the weapon spinning into the ferns.

More torches appeared.

Renaud entered the clearing with eight armed men behind him.

“Sir Hans Fouler,” he called. “By order of the Lord Protector, surrender the princess and stand down.”

“There is no Lord Protector while the king lives.”

“By sunrise, there will be.”

Renaud raised two fingers.

The mercenaries spread around the oak.

Hans placed himself directly before the hollow. “You will not touch her.”

They came at him together.

Hans fought as if the narrow circle of earth before the tree were the whole kingdom. He turned one blade, ducked another, and struck beneath a breastplate. A spear glanced from his shoulder guard. He broke its shaft with his boot and drove the splintered end into the attacker’s thigh.

An arrow buried itself high in his left shoulder.

Hans staggered but did not fall. He snapped the shaft and changed his sword to his other hand.

Delta could remain hidden no longer.

A mercenary slipped around the edge of the fight, reaching into the hollow from the side. Delta slashed his palm with her dagger. When he recoiled, she drove her shoulder into him and burst from beneath the roots.

“Delta, no!” Hans shouted.

She seized the fallen half of the broken spear and stood with her back to his. For three breaths, they fought together. Delta struck one man across the face and blocked another from reaching Hans’s wounded side. Hans turned around her, guarding the spaces she could not see.

It might have worked against soldiers bound by honor.

Renaud drew a second dagger and threw it, not at Delta, but past her.

Hans saw the blade and moved into its path.

It struck beneath his ribs.

His body folded around the impact.

“Hans!”

Two men caught Delta from behind. She kicked, twisted, and drove the back of her head into one man’s jaw, but a third tore the spear from her hands. They dragged her toward the river while she screamed Hans’s name.

Hans pulled Renaud’s dagger from his side and forced himself upright. Blood spread across his tunic. He took one step, then another, his sword lifting again.

Renaud met him in the center of the clearing.

Their blades struck once. Twice. On the third blow, Hans’s wounded arm failed. Renaud knocked his sword aside and drove a narrow blade through the gap in his breastplate.

Hans dropped to one knee.

The world seemed to stop with him.

Delta tore free of one captor and reached toward him. “Please! Hans, look at me!”

He raised his head.

Across the rain and torchlight, their eyes found each other.

His lips moved.

My love...

No sound reached her.

Beneath his torn tunic, Fiona’s stone ignited.

Golden light poured through the seams of the leather pouch. It spread across Hans’s chest, ran along the wet ground, and climbed Delta’s outstretched hand before the mercenaries could pull her away.

The instant the light touched her, every memory of Hans blazed inside her at once: plum blossoms drifting through a childhood sky, his bandaged hands, the secret name Francheska, the melody beneath the stars, his promise in the hollow tree.

Then the light drew those memories out of reach.

Delta felt them tearing away like pages caught in a violent wind. She clung to his face, his name, the sound of his voice, but the stone gathered each piece into itself as if hiding something precious where death could not follow.

“No,” she sobbed. “Do not take him from me.”

The golden light collapsed back into the clearing.

Hans fell forward into the leaves.

Renaud’s men dragged Delta into the trees. She fought them until a blow struck the side of her head and darkness rushed over her.

Her last conscious feeling was an unbearable emptiness opening inside her chest.

Her last conscious thought had no name.

Chapter 17: Hans's Final Message

The clearing fell silent after the riders left.

Rain whispered through the pine needles. The wounded hound had fled, and the river carried away the last echoes of the pursuit. Broken torches hissed in the mud around the ancient oak.

Mathew waited until Renaud's column was well beyond the ridge before leaving the trees.

He had joined the pursuit at the lower forest road with Hans's silver whistle hidden inside his glove. When Renaud divided the riders, Mathew sent three men and half the hounds after Ashwind's trail downstream. He could not openly turn the column without exposing himself, but he could make it slower, less certain, and blind on one side.

It had not been enough.

Bodies lay among the ferns. Some wore Fortier's blue. Others wore no colors at all. At the center of them, beneath the oak, Hans Fouler lay facedown in the leaves.

Mathew ran to him.

"Sir Hans." He dropped to his knees and rolled the knight carefully onto his back. "Sir Hans, can you hear me?"

Hans's breastplate had been pierced beneath the heart. Blood welled through the narrow opening with each shallow breath. The arrow remained buried in his shoulder, and another wound darkened his side.

Mathew pressed both hands against the worst of it.

"Stay with me. I can carry you to the redoubt. Commander Vale has a surgeon."

Hans's eyes opened a fraction. For several seconds they moved without focus. Then they found Mathew's face.

"Delta?"

The name was barely sound.

“Alive,” Mathew said quickly. “Renaud ordered them to take her alive. They are carrying her back toward the palace.”

Relief crossed Hans’s face even as pain tightened it again.

“Listen... no time.”

“Do not speak.” Mathew tore open his cloak to make a bandage. “Save your strength.”

Hans caught his wrist.

The grip was weak, but the command in it remained.

“Listen.”

Mathew stopped.

Hans struggled to reach beneath his torn tunic. His fingers found the concealed leather pouch, but he could not free its clasp. Mathew opened it for him.

Fiona’s stone lay inside, glowing through a web of golden light.

Mathew had seen the crystal once from a distance during a royal procession. Then it had looked like a beautiful relic. Now warmth moved from it into his rain-cold hands, carrying the faint impression of a girl’s laughter and a melody he did not know.

Hans closed Mathew’s fingers around the stone.

“Take it to her. Not Fortier. Not the council. Delta.”

“I will.”

“When she is alone. The stone... kept what she lost.” Hans drew a broken breath. “She may not know me.”

Mathew looked toward the trail where the mercenaries had vanished. “How could she forget you?”

Hans’s gaze shifted to the hollow beneath the oak. Golden light still glimmered faintly on the roots.

“It protected her. Hid me from the pain.” He swallowed, fighting for the next words. “It must give me back when she is ready.”

Mathew tucked the stone into the inner pocket of his cloak.

“Tell her...” Hans’s voice failed.

“Tell her what?” Mathew bent close enough that his ear nearly touched the knight’s lips.

Hans looked past him into the rain. Perhaps he saw the palace garden beneath spring stars. Perhaps he saw a little girl kneeling beside a wounded bird, or the woman standing with a broken spear at his back.

“Tell her Hans said... I love you, Delta.”

The words left him with a long, trembling breath.

Mathew’s vision blurred. He had served beside Hans only two years, but every young soldier in the northern companies knew what kind of man he was. Hans never asked another guard to stand where he would not stand himself. He remembered the names of stable boys. He trained frightened recruits after the officers had gone to supper. He loved the princess with a devotion no rule of rank had managed to make smaller.

“I swear it, Sir Hans,” Mathew said. “On my life, I will place the stone in her hands and speak your exact words.”

Hans’s fingers loosened around his wrist.

“Good.”

A faint peace settled over his face.

“My father...”

“I will find Sir Phillip too.”

Hans gave the smallest nod.

His eyes closed. The tension left his body, and his head turned toward the hollow where Delta had hidden. For one instant, the stone beneath Mathew’s cloak pulsed in time with the last beat of his heart.

Then the light became still.

Mathew remained kneeling in the rain, both hands pressed uselessly against the wound.

The watch whistle Hans had thrown to him lay against his chest. Mathew drew it out and placed it in the knight's palm, folding the cold fingers around the silver.

"You kept your oath," he whispered. "I will keep mine."

He dragged Hans beneath the shelter of the oak and covered him with his gray scout's cloak. There was no time to carry the body, but Mathew marked the tree with the sign of the Sovereign Shield so loyal soldiers could find him later.

From the southern ridge came a single horn call.

Renaud's column was nearing the palace road.

Mathew stood. He wiped the blood from his hands onto his tunic, concealed the stone beneath his shirt, and took the blue coat from a fallen mercenary. Wearing it sickened him, but it would carry him through gates that were already closing to the king's true men.

He found an uninjured horse at the edge of the clearing and mounted.

Before riding away, he looked back once at the gray cloak beneath the oak.

"She will know," he promised.

Then Mathew followed the men who had taken Delta, carrying Hans's love and Fiona's light back toward the enemy's palace.

Chapter 18: The Forgotten Knight

Delta awoke to the soft ticking of the mantle clock.

For a long time, she did not know where she was. The canopy above her seemed too high, the velvet curtains too red. Rain tapped the windows, and somewhere beyond the walls a bell marked an hour she could not name.

Then the room settled into recognition.

Her bedchamber. Her father's palace. Her own hands lying pale against the coverlet.

Purple bruises circled both wrists.

Delta sat up too quickly. Pain split across the side of her head, and the room tilted. A maid sleeping in the chair beside the fire startled awake and hurried to the bed.

"Your Highness, please. The physician said you must remain still."

"What happened to me?"

The maid's eyes filled with frightened relief. "You have slept nearly a day. Captain Renaud brought you back from the forest. We feared..." She stopped and looked toward the door.

The forest.

The word opened a dark space inside Delta's mind.

She remembered rain. She remembered a horse plunging between trees and the terrible cries of hounds behind her. She remembered cold water around her legs, torchlight, and a vast oak split by lightning.

Beyond those fragments lay nothing.

Delta pressed both hands to her temples. "Why was I in the forest?"

The maid lowered her gaze. "Duke Fortier said Sir Hans took you from the opera hall."

A violent ache struck beneath Delta's breastbone.

"Hans?"

The name felt familiar in the way a forgotten song felt familiar: not as knowledge, but as longing. She searched for a face and found only golden light closing over darkness.

"Who is Hans?" she whispered.

The maid stared at her.

Before she could answer, the door opened.

Fortier entered with the royal physician and two guards in blue coats. His expression softened when he saw Delta awake.

"Thank God," he said. "You have returned to us."

Delta watched him approach. Something in her body recoiled before her mind could explain why.

"My father."

"His condition is unchanged. He rests under careful watch."

"Take me to him."

The physician stepped forward. "Your Highness, you suffered a severe blow to the head. Your pulse remains unsteady. It would be dangerous to leave the bed."

"I asked to see the king."

Fortier sat in the chair beside her. "And you shall, when you are strong enough. Last night nearly cost the kingdom both its sovereign and its heir."

"Tell me what happened."

Fortier exchanged a grave look with the physician.

"Sir Hans Foulter removed you from the royal box during the performance. Witnesses saw him flee the palace with you on horseback. He attacked the gate guard and carried you into the forest. Captain Renaud followed and recovered you after a violent struggle."

Delta listened for memory to rise and deny him.

Nothing came.

“Why would my knight abduct me?”

“We may never know. Ambition. Obsession. Perhaps madness. His devotion to you had ceased to respect its proper bounds.”

The ache beneath her ribs sharpened into anger.

“Do not speak of him that way.”

Fortier’s eyebrows lifted. “You remember him?”

Delta opened her mouth, then closed it.

She remembered no one. Yet every part of her rejected the accusation.

“Where is he?”

Fortier folded his hands. “He was gravely wounded in the forest. Renaud’s men could not find him after the fighting. The river was high. We must assume he is dead.”

Dead.

The room went soundless.

Delta felt tears slide down her face before she understood she was crying.

Fortier leaned closer. “The mind sometimes hides what it cannot bear. Do not force yourself to remember a man who betrayed your trust.”

She turned her face away from him.

The physician examined the wound at her temple and gave her a bitter sleeping draught. Delta held it beneath her tongue until he looked away, then let it spill into the folds of the blanket. She did not know why she distrusted the cup. Her hand acted before thought.

Fortier remained until her eyes closed.

She heard him speak quietly at the door.

“No visitors without my permission. Remove Foulter’s men from this floor. His name is not to be spoken in her presence again.”

When the room was empty, Delta opened her eyes.

She rose despite the pain and crossed to the window. The forest formed a black line beyond the palace roofs. At the sight of it, terror closed around her throat.

She saw a flash of silver beneath rain.

A hand reaching toward her.

Then the image vanished.

“Hans,” she said to the glass.

No face answered the name.

Later that afternoon, a court minstrel played in the long gallery below her rooms. The melody was not one Delta knew, only a simple sequence on the harp. Yet the first rising notes struck some hidden place inside her, and grief poured through her with such force that she fell to her knees.

Her maid found her there, weeping without sound.

“What is it, Your Highness?”

“I don’t know.” Delta pressed a fist against her heart. “Someone is gone.”

The maid knelt beside her but said nothing.

As evening came, Delta searched her room for evidence of the life she could not remember. In the bottom of a writing desk, she found a pressed plum blossom wrapped in old paper. On the back, a boy’s careful hand had written one word.

Francheska.

Delta traced the letters.

The name belonged to her. She knew that with absolute certainty. But when she tried to remember who had given it to her, pain and golden light sealed the path.

She hid the blossom inside her sleeve as footsteps approached the outer room.

Fortier’s guards changed watch outside her door. The key turned in the lock.

Delta stood alone in the gathering dark, surrounded by a life from which one person had been cut away so completely that even the wound had no name.

Chapter 19: Tears Without Memory

Two nights later, someone climbed the ivy beneath Delta's terrace.

She heard the faint scrape of a boot against stone and rose from the chair beside the dying fire. Fortier's guards stood beyond the locked outer door, but the rain had driven them away from the terrace windows.

Delta took the small silver dagger from beneath her pillow.

A gloved hand appeared over the balustrade. Then a young man in the blue coat of Fortier's guard pulled himself onto the terrace and dropped silently behind the curtain.

Delta raised the blade. "One step closer and I call the watch."

The stranger pulled off his cap. He was scarcely older than Hans must have been, though the thought came without a face. Damp brown hair clung to his forehead, and exhaustion hollowed his eyes.

"My lady, please. My name is Mathew. I served the northern companies with Sir Hans Fouler."

The name struck Delta's heart again.

"Who is Hans?" she demanded. "Everyone looks at me as though I should know, but there is nothing. Tell me what was taken from me."

Mathew's expression changed from urgency to disbelief.

"You truly do not remember him."

Footsteps sounded in the passage outside. Both of them froze, but the guards continued past.

Mathew reached slowly beneath the borrowed blue coat. "I know why."

He brought out a small object wrapped in a strip of gray cloth and placed it on the table between them.

Delta recognized the fabric before she recognized the thing inside it. The cloth was torn from a scout's cloak and stained dark at one edge. Mathew opened it.

Fiona's stone glowed in the center of his palm.

The chamber changed around it. Golden light moved over the walls, gentle as sunrise through leaves. Delta lowered the dagger without meaning to.

"My mother's stone," she whispered.

"King James entrusted it to Hans. Hans entrusted it to me."

Mathew held it out.

Delta hesitated. Every instinct drew her toward the crystal, but the sealed place in her mind recoiled as if it knew pain waited there.

"What will it do?"

"He said it kept what you lost. He said it must give him back when you were ready."

Delta touched the stone.

Warmth passed through her fingers and climbed her arm. The room vanished for the space of a heartbeat.

She saw dark eyes beneath falling plum blossoms.

A boy's hand offered half an apple.

A man's voice whispered, Look into my eyes.

Then the vision closed.

Delta gasped and nearly dropped the crystal. Mathew caught her wrist, steadying her without taking the stone away.

Tears spilled down her face.

"Why am I crying?" she asked. "Why does his name feel like someone opened my chest?"

"Because you loved him."

The answer left no room for courtly caution.

Delta sank into the chair.

Mathew knelt before her. “Sir Hans was your personal knight, but that is not all he was. He grew beside you. He guarded the stone for you. When Fortier’s men surrounded the oak, he stood between them and you until he could no longer stand.”

Delta looked at the unfamiliar stone in her hand and felt grief too large for a stranger.

“Is he dead?”

Mathew bowed his head.

The hope she had not known she carried collapsed.

“I found him beneath the tree after Renaud took you. He was still alive, but only for a few minutes. He asked first whether you had survived.”

Delta covered her mouth, but a sob escaped.

“He gave me the stone. He made me swear I would wait until you were alone. And he gave me a message.”

Mathew lifted his eyes to hers.

“Hans said, ‘I love you, Delta.’”

The words moved through her like a blade and a blessing together.

The crystal flared.

A melody sounded at the edge of hearing, not played in the chamber but carried inside the light. Delta knew where the next note would rise. Her lips parted, and a fragment of song escaped on a trembling breath.

“I saw heaven through the morning light...”

Mathew stared. “That song. He hummed it sometimes on watch. He never told us where it came from.”

Delta did not know either, yet the melody belonged to the missing shape within her. She pressed the stone against her heart.

“What happened to his body?”

“I covered him beneath the oak and marked the tree. Commander Vale sent two loyal men after I reached the redoubt. They will bring him home if Fortier’s patrols do not find them first.”

“And my father?”

“Still alive when I entered the palace. Barely. Fortier has arrested Sir Phillip and several of the old guard. He means to have the council name him Lord Protector at dawn.”

Delta stood. The stone’s light shone between her fingers.

“Then we must reach the king.”

“Not through the outer door. Renaud has doubled the watch. I came to lead you through the chapel passage, but the route was discovered after I entered. There are six men on the stair now.”

A key scraped in the lock.

Mathew rose at once.

“Hide,” Delta whispered.

The outer door opened before he could reach the wardrobe. Fortier’s voice sounded in the receiving room.

“Princess? I heard movement.”

Mathew crossed the terrace in two strides. He swung one leg over the balustrade.

“Wait.” Delta caught his sleeve. “How will I find you?”

“You won’t need to. Remember. The stone will show you the way.”

He dropped into the ivy as Fortier entered the bedchamber.

Delta closed both hands around the crystal and drew them into the folds of her nightdress. Its warmth pressed against her skin, but no light escaped.

Fortier surveyed the room. His gaze moved from the open terrace door to the mud on the carpet.

“Who was here?”

Delta let the tears remain on her face. “No one. I woke from a dream and opened the doors because I could not breathe.”

Fortier stepped onto the terrace. Below, ivy shifted against the wall, but Mathew had already disappeared into the rain.

“You are not well,” Fortier said when he returned. “Tomorrow the physician will give you something stronger.”

“Tomorrow,” Delta answered softly.

He mistook the word for submission.

After he locked the door again, Delta drew out the stone.

Golden threads turned slowly beneath its surface. Within them waited a boy beneath plum blossoms, a knight beneath an ancient oak, and a song whose singer had died before he could finish his promise.

Delta held the crystal to her ear.

This time, when the melody began, she hummed with it.

Part Three: The Stone Remembers

Chapter 20: The Song Without a Singer

By morning, Fortier had turned Delta's chambers into a prison disguised as a sickroom.

Two guards stood outside the main door. Another watched the terrace from the courtyard below. Her maid was replaced by a woman from Fortier's household who spoke softly, touched nothing without permission, and reported every question Delta asked.

The royal physician arrived carrying a dark glass bottle.

"A stronger sleeping draught, Your Highness," he said without meeting her eyes. "The duke believes rest will quiet the distressing dreams."

Delta accepted the cup and pretended to drink. When the physician turned to pack his instruments, she poured the liquid into the soil of a potted rosemary plant.

The leaves curled before noon.

After that, Delta ate only bread torn from the center of each loaf and drank rainwater caught from the terrace gutter. She kept Fiona's stone wrapped in Mathew's gray cloth beneath a loose floorboard near the bed.

Fortier visited twice. He spoke of her father's fragile condition and the council's need for temporary leadership. He urged her to sign an order confirming him as Lord Protector until the king recovered.

Delta told him her hand shook too badly to hold a pen.

His smile remained patient. His eyes did not.

When evening came, the palace fell into an unnatural quiet. No musicians played in the gallery. No servants laughed in the courtyard. Fortier had ordered the royal wing cleared so completely that Delta could hear the guards changing weight outside her door.

She waited until their voices faded down the passage, then lifted the floorboard.

The stone was already glowing.

Delta carried it to the window seat and unwrapped it. Threads of light moved beneath its surface like memories searching for a path home.

“Show me,” she whispered. “If I loved him, show me why.”

Nothing happened.

She closed both hands around the crystal. Warmth gathered in her palms, but the sealed place in her mind remained shut.

Frustration rose with her grief. Mathew had risked his life to reach her. Hans had died believing the stone would return what it kept. Yet she could not summon even his face.

Delta pressed the crystal against her forehead.

“Please.”

A single note trembled through it.

She lowered the stone.

The note sounded again, clear and aching. It was the fragment she had hummed after Mathew delivered the message. Delta followed it instinctively.

“I saw heaven through the morning light...”

The crystal brightened.

She sang the next line without knowing how she knew it.

“I heard mercy in the quiet night...”

A golden thread uncoiled from the heart of the stone and rose between her hands. It touched the center of her brow.

The chamber disappeared.

Delta stood beside a fountain under a spring sky. She was small again, crouched over a wounded sparrow. A dark-haired boy watched from behind a knight’s cloak, his eyes wide with wonder.

She heard his voice, young and breathless.

She is an angel talking.

The vision changed.

The same boy sat beside her beneath a willow, dividing a pear and giving her the sweeter half. His hands were clumsy with kindness. When a stern governess pulled him away, Delta felt the old heat of her own anger and heard herself declare that he was her friend.

Another memory broke through: calloused fingers wrapping linen around her scraped palm; a wooden sword held out after hers had cracked; laughter in an abandoned courtyard full of white roses.

The boy grew taller with each flash.

He knelt before her father and rose as Sir Hans Fouler, wearing the silver cloak of her personal guard. Pride and sorrow lived together in his face when he turned toward her.

Delta reached for him.

The image dissolved into rain.

She was beneath the ancient oak again. Hans stood between her and a ring of blades. An arrow struck his shoulder. He turned toward her, and golden light erupted before she could see what followed.

Delta cried out and returned to the bedchamber.

The stone fell into her lap. She bent over it, shaking.

Hans had not abducted her.

He had been part of her life from its earliest days. Fortier had taken a love story and named it treason because he believed her memory could no longer contradict him.

Delta wiped her face and lifted the stone again.

“You were telling the truth,” she whispered to the man she still could not fully remember. “You died protecting me.”

The crystal pulsed once.

Beyond the locked door, a guard coughed. Delta wrapped the stone quickly, but the melody continued inside her.

She hummed more softly, following it through the darkness.

A man's voice rose beneath the song, close enough to feel against her skin.

Look into my eyes.

Delta closed her eyes.

White roses opened in the dark.

Chapter 21: Francheska

The white roses became a doorway.

Delta followed the remembered voice through them and found herself standing in the abandoned courtyard behind the southern glasshouse.

Rain had not yet begun, but its scent weighed heavily in the summer air. Ivy climbed the broken brick walls. The roses Hans and Delta had rescued as children spread across the trellis in wild white clusters.

This memory was not a quick flash. The stone returned every detail.

She saw her younger self sitting on the low bench with both hands covering her face. A formal reception continued somewhere beyond the garden walls. The court had spent the afternoon discussing the future queen as though she were a treaty to be negotiated: whom she should marry, which provinces she must please, how rarely she ought to laugh in public.

“Everyone expects Delta to be iron,” the younger Delta said. “Unyielding. Flawless. If I break for even an instant, they tear away whatever is left.”

Hans crossed the mossy stones and knelt before her.

He was not yet her sworn knight, but the beginnings of the man were already present in him: broad shoulders, work-roughened hands, and eyes that never turned away when she showed him pain.

“You don’t have to wear the mask here,” he said.

He lifted her face between his hands.

Delta, standing unseen within the memory, felt the touch as though it rested on her skin now.

“Look into my eyes,” Hans murmured. His thumb traced her cheek. “I see you. I’m not leaving you.”

The words passed through the memory and reached the locked bedchamber centuries of grief away.

Only between us, Delta thought.

Her younger self placed one hand over his wrist. “Only between us.”

Hans leaned forward until his brow rested against hers.

“They only see the title,” he whispered. “But I know you, Francheska.”

The name entered her like light.

Francheska was not written in the royal register. No herald announced it, and no minister shaped it into a command. It belonged to the self beneath the crown: the girl who climbed orchard walls, cried when wounded birds died, stole warm tarts from the kitchen, and wanted to be loved without becoming a symbol first.

Hans had not invented another woman. He had named the woman already there.

The memory shifted.

Delta saw years of the hidden garden in fragments. Hans waiting beside the sundial after winter patrol. Delta mending a tear in his cloak while he pretended not to watch her hands. Their shoulders touching on the bench as they read the same letter. His quiet laughter when she left flour across her cheek after escaping the kitchens.

She saw the moments in which friendship had changed its name without either of them daring to speak it.

Hans’s fingers lingering when he handed her a rose. Delta listening for his footsteps before every court procession. The two of them standing too close beneath the glasshouse roof while rain enclosed them from the world.

Each memory carried the same truth. He did not love the crown waiting above her. He loved the person who became visible when it was set aside.

The vision moved to the jasmine terrace beneath the stars.

Hans sat with the lute across his knee, singing the song that had opened the stone.

Look into my eyes, let the shadows clear,

Every road I walk has brought me here.

Delta heard her own voice join his. She remembered the realization blooming in her chest when she understood that every lyric was about her.

Then Hans stood. His hand touched her cheek. His courage gathered for the confession both of them had carried through the years.

The terrace latch crashed open.

The memory shattered at the exact place the moment had shattered before.

Delta returned to her locked chamber with the stone blazing in her hands.

She fell from the window seat to the carpet, not from weakness but from the weight of being known again.

“Francheska,” she said aloud.

The name no longer felt like an inscription left by a stranger. It was hers because Hans had seen her clearly enough to give it back.

Delta drew the pressed plum blossom from her sleeve. The old paper trembled between her fingers. She remembered the day Hans had written the name on its back, smiling as though they had created a small kingdom no one else could enter.

She pressed the blossom against the stone.

Golden light spread through every vein of the dried petals.

The barrier inside her mind cracked.

Beyond it waited the forest, Hans’s unfinished promise, and the truth of his final stand.

Delta closed both hands around the crystal.

“I am ready,” she whispered.

The stone opened.

Chapter 22: Everything Returns

The stone returned everything.

Memory did not arrive as a gentle sequence. It broke over Delta in one great wave.

She was a child running through the orchard with Hans at her heels. She was a girl watching him rise from the training yard with blood on his mouth and stubbornness in his eyes. She was the princess fastening the silver sash of her personal knight while the court pretended not to see how carefully their hands avoided touching.

She remembered the river crossing where he carried her above the current. The winter hound that lunged from the brush and the way Hans placed himself between its teeth and her body. The white roses. The secret name. The night he sang “Angels in Your Eyes” beneath the stars and almost gave language to the love that had shaped both their lives.

Then the stone carried her back into the forest.

This time, the golden light did not protect her from what happened beneath the oak.

Delta felt the broken spear in her hands and Hans’s back against hers. She heard Renaud’s dagger cut the air. She watched Hans step into its path, saw the blade enter beneath his ribs, and remembered the shock on his face before pain replaced it.

She remembered being dragged away.

Hans forced himself upright when no body should have risen. He crossed the clearing through arrows, blood, and rain because she was still reaching for him.

Renaud’s sword found the gap in his armor.

Hans fell to one knee.

Across the clearing, he looked at her as though all the years between the fountain and the oak existed in that final gaze.

His lips formed the words she had not been able to hear.

My love...

The stone flared within the memory. Delta felt it pull Hans from her mind, gathering every shared moment into light before grief could destroy what remained of her.

Now it gave him back.

Delta returned to the bedchamber on her knees, clutching the crystal against her heart.

A sound tore from her that did not resemble weeping. It was the grief of the child who had found her first friend, the woman who had waited years for his confession, and the princess who had watched her knight die keeping a promise the kingdom had no right to demand.

"You loved me," she sobbed. "You loved me, and you died believing I would forget you."

The stone warmed beneath her hands.

Mathew's voice returned with perfect clarity: Hans said, I love you, Delta.

She pressed her forehead to the floor and let the grief have its full measure. She did not command herself to be iron. She did not silence the woman beneath the crown. For the first time since waking, Francheska mourned him without witnesses and without shame.

When the tears finally quieted, dawn had begun to pale the windows.

Fortier meant to take the council at sunrise.

Her father still lay poisoned. Sir Phillip and the old guard were imprisoned. Mathew was somewhere inside a palace that would kill him if his loyalty became known. Hans had not died so that she could remain locked in a room while Fortier completed the crime.

Delta sat back and wiped her face with both hands.

The grief remained. It would remain for the rest of her life. But beneath it, something colder and steadier took shape.

Resolve.

She placed the stone in the center of her palm. “My mother left you for me. My father protected you. Hans died carrying you. If there is power in my blood, I need it now.”

At first, the crystal gave only its familiar glow.

Delta closed her eyes and remembered Hans beside her beneath the oak, not shielding her from the fight but trusting her at his back. She remembered his words: I see you.

Golden light gathered between her fingers.

It did not show another memory. It answered her.

A thin arc of radiance rose from the stone and circled her wrist like a living thread. The air stirred though the terrace doors were closed. Across the room, the flame of the last candle bent toward her.

Delta opened her eyes.

The light vanished, but the power remained as warmth beneath her skin.

She understood little of it. She did not know where it could carry her or what price it might demand. She knew only that it had awakened for memory, for love, and now for her deliberate will.

Delta hid the stone securely against her breast and studied the room.

The main door was guarded. The terrace was watched from below. But the palace had been her childhood home before it became Fortier’s cage. Behind the wardrobe ran a narrow servants’ stair used long ago to tend the chimneys. Lady Beatrice had once locked it after finding Delta and Hans returning from the kitchens covered in flour.

Delta still knew where the old key was kept.

She drew it from the false bottom of her jewel box, changed into a plain wool dress, and braided her hair tightly beneath a servant’s scarf.

Before leaving, she placed the pressed plum blossom inside the cover of her prayer book. She touched the name on its back one last time.

“I will save him,” she whispered. “Then I will finish what you began.”

The stone pulsed once against her heart.

Delta moved the wardrobe aside and unlocked the hidden stair.

Chapter 23: The Second Escape

The hidden stair smelled of soot and cold stone.

Delta descended sideways through the narrow passage, one hand against the wall. The servants had not used it in years. Dust softened her footsteps, and old cobwebs caught against her scarf.

At the bottom, she listened behind the panel that opened near the laundry rooms.

Men's voices crossed the corridor outside.

"Search every service passage," Renaud ordered. "The duke wants her found before the council assembles."

Delta waited until the boots receded, then pushed the panel open.

The palace before dawn belonged to Fortier's men. Blue coats guarded the stairwells. Servants moved with lowered heads, carrying breakfast trays beneath the eyes of armed strangers. From the direction of the great hall came the scrape of benches being arranged for the council that would make Fortier Lord Protector.

Delta kept her face hidden and joined two kitchen maids crossing toward the royal wing. She carried an empty linen basket against her hip. No one looked twice at another frightened servant.

At the last passage before the king's rooms, she saw the royal physician emerge between two guards.

His face was gray. One guard carried the dark glass bottle Delta had poured into the rosemary pot.

"Prepare the full measure," the man said. "His Grace wants no delay."

Delta tightened her grip on the basket.

She could not reach her father through the guarded corridor. The old apothecary stair opened into his dressing room from the lower courtyard, but to reach it she had to cross the servants' yard.

She turned away before the physician could recognize her.

The yard lay beneath a paling sky. Rain had stopped, leaving the cobbles black and shining. Delta crossed behind a wagon stacked with firewood and reached the arched entrance to the apothecary stair.

Four mercenaries stepped from the shadows.

Captain Renaud stood behind them.

“I told the duke you would choose the path closest to your father,” he said. “Grief makes people wonderfully predictable.”

Delta lowered the basket.

“You murdered Sir Hans Foulter. You helped poison the king. Stand aside, and I will ask the court to remember that you obeyed another man’s orders.”

Renaud smiled. “There will be no court for you to ask.”

The mercenaries drew their swords.

Delta placed one hand over the stone beneath her dress. Warmth answered immediately.

“Stand aside,” she said again.

The nearest man lunged.

Golden light exploded around her.

His blade struck a translucent wall and rebounded with a force that threw him across the yard. He hit the wagon hard enough to scatter firewood over the stones.

The other men stopped.

Delta stared at the curved shield surrounding her. Threads of light moved through it like veins inside a leaf. She could feel every impact as pressure against her own body.

Renaud recovered first. “Again. Together.”

Three blades struck the barrier.

Pain drove Delta to one knee. The shield held, but cracks of white fire spread across its surface. The stone burned against her chest.

She remembered Hans standing in this same shape before the hollow tree: one life placed between her and every blade.

Not again, she thought.

Delta rose and pushed both hands outward.

The barrier expanded in a roaring wave. Mercenaries flew backward. Windows shattered above the courtyard. The cobbles split beneath her feet, and golden roots of light raced through the cracks.

The air folded.

Renaud caught the iron gate before the force could carry him away. Terror replaced triumph on his face.

“What are you?”

Delta held the stone as the courtyard bent around her. “I am Delta Vonnfield.”

The power kept growing.

She tried to draw it back, but grief, fear, and the stored force of every recovered memory had opened something too large to close. The broken cobbles vanished beneath a field of stars. The palace walls stretched into pillars of light.

“Father!” Delta reached toward the apothecary stair.

The stone pulled in the opposite direction.

Through the roar, she heard a melody.

It was faint and impossibly distant, played by no instrument in Vonnfield. Yet it was unmistakable: the first rising phrase of “Angels in Your Eyes.”

Hans’s song had survived somewhere beyond the world she knew.

Delta closed her hand around the crystal. “Take me to him.”

The command was not reason. It came from the deepest bond the stone had preserved.

Golden light spiraled around her, carrying the melody with it. The mercenaries, the courtyard, and the palace dissolved into an immense passage of darkness and stars.

Delta fell through fragments of time.

She saw Vonnfield's towers weather and vanish. Forests became roads. Fire became electricity. Generations of unfamiliar faces passed like reflections on water. Through all of them ran one unbroken thread of light, the same color as Hans's final heartbeat.

At the far end of that thread stood a man she had never seen.

He turned as though he had heard her call.

The stone went dark.

Delta dropped out of the stars and struck a surface harder than any road in Vonnfield.

Part Four: A World Without Horses

Chapter 24: The Twenty-First Century

Delta struck the ground hard enough to drive the air from her lungs.

For several seconds, she lay curled on a black surface slick with rain. The stone pressed painfully beneath her ribs. Noise crashed around her from every direction: horns, engines, a distant siren, and the ceaseless hiss of wheels through water.

She opened her eyes.

The sky had disappeared behind towers of glass and dark steel. Hundreds of square windows burned high above her, each holding a steady light that did not tremble like flame. Colored signs glowed along the street in letters she could read but forms she did not understand.

Delta pushed herself upright.

Her wool dress was torn at one knee. Mud from the palace yard streaked her hands, but beneath it lay no cobblestone. The road was made from a smooth black substance harder than packed earth and seamless from wall to wall.

A machine roared past the mouth of the alley.

Delta recoiled against the brick. It was shaped like a metal carriage with no horse before it. White lights glared from its front, red lights burned behind, and a man sat enclosed within it as calmly as though the roaring beast were ordinary.

Another followed. Then five more.

The vision inside the stone returned to her: forests becoming roads, fire becoming electricity, generations passing in a river of faces.

She had not crossed a border.

She had fallen out of her own century.

“Father,” Delta whispered.

She pulled Fiona's stone from beneath her dress. Its golden fire had faded to a weak ember. When she willed it to open the path home, nothing happened.

"No. You cannot bring me here and go dark."

The crystal gave one faint pulse, then became still.

Delta rose, bracing one hand against the wall. A painted metal door stood nearby, but it had no visible latch. Above it, a glass eye watched the alley. She moved away from it, unnerved by the sense of being observed.

At the street, people hurried beneath small folding canopies. Their clothing was stranger than anything the stone had shown her: short coats closed by metal teeth, trousers worn by men and women alike, shoes pale as bone. Nearly everyone carried a glowing rectangle and looked into it as if receiving a private prophecy.

A woman glanced at Delta's torn dress, then quickly away.

"Please," Delta said. "What city is this?"

The woman slowed. White cords ran from her ears to the device in her hand. "Are you filming something?"

"I do not understand."

"Do you need help?"

Delta looked toward a vehicle flashing red and blue lights at the next crossing. Men in dark uniforms stood beside it. Uniforms had belonged to Fortier only moments ago.

She stepped back. "No. Forgive me."

The woman watched her with concern but was swept away by the moving crowd.

Delta entered the flow of people and tried to imitate them. Every few steps, something startled her: doors opening by themselves, voices speaking from hidden boxes, a picture moving across an enormous screen without musicians or actors behind it. The air smelled of wet stone, burned fuel, coffee, and food from places lit brighter than palace kitchens.

No one bowed. No one recognized her.

The anonymity should have been freedom. Instead, it made her feel erased.

She reached a broad intersection where colored lights governed the traffic. A symbol changed from a red hand to a white walking figure, and the waiting crowd stepped into the road. Delta followed.

Halfway across, the figure began to flash.

Engines growled on either side. Delta froze.

A horn blasted. Someone caught her elbow and pulled her onto the curb.

“Watch the light,” a man snapped before disappearing into the crowd.

Delta stood trembling. The stone warmed briefly beneath her dress, not enough to open a path, only enough to remind her that the thread she had followed ended somewhere in this impossible place.

The melody.

Hans’s song had called across time. Someone here carried it.

She followed the faint warmth through three streets until the crowds thinned. Rain gathered strength, soaking the scarf around her hair. The buildings became shorter, brick replacing glass. A narrow side street opened between a grocery shop and a closed workshop.

The stone pulsed again.

Delta stepped toward the alley mouth.

A new roar rose behind her.

She turned.

An enormous white vehicle swung around the corner, far larger than the metal carriages she had seen. Its lights fixed upon her. A horn bellowed with the force of a war trumpet.

Delta’s body refused to move.

The last thing she saw was the vehicle bearing down upon her through the rain.

Chapter 25: David

A hand closed around Delta's wrist and pulled with absolute force.

She flew backward into the brick alcove as the white vehicle thundered past. Water exploded from its wheels, drenching the sidewalk. The driver leaned on the horn and vanished down the street.

Delta struck a man's chest. He turned his body around hers, taking the spray across his back.

For one suspended breath, neither moved.

The stone burned warm beneath Delta's dress.

She tore herself free and drew the silver dagger from her bodice.

"Stay back."

The stranger raised both hands.

He was young, perhaps near Hans's age when Delta had last seen him, but nothing else was the same. His damp hair fell untidily across his forehead. He wore a canvas work jacket over a dark shirt and heavy boots marked with sawdust. A canvas tool bag lay where he had dropped it in the rain.

His face was sharper than Hans's, his mouth more expressive. Yet his eyes held Delta motionless.

They were not Hans's eyes.

They carried the same instinct to place himself between her and danger.

The stranger stared back as if recognition had struck him too. His gaze moved over her soaked dress, the dagger, and the bruises around her wrists. Confusion replaced the first shock, but not caution.

"Easy," he said. His voice was deep and distinctly modern, the words shaped with an unfamiliar rhythm. "I won't touch you again. The truck almost hit you."

Delta kept the blade raised. "What manner of beast was that?"

He glanced after the delivery truck. "A badly driven one."

For a moment, humor touched his face. It was not Hans's grave restraint. It belonged entirely to this man.

"Are you hurt?" he asked.

"Where am I?"

"Westbridge. Near Calder and Ninth." He studied her expression. "Does that mean anything to you?"

Delta shook her head.

He reached slowly toward his jacket pocket. Delta lifted the dagger higher.

"Phone," he explained. "I'm going to call an ambulance."

The black rectangle in his hand lit beneath his thumb. Delta backed against the wall.

"No soldiers. No authorities."

"It's medical help. You might have a concussion."

"I will not go with armed men."

He stopped before completing the call. Rain ran from his hair into his eyes, but he did not lower his hands.

"All right. No call yet." He slipped the device away. "My name is David. What's yours?"

The name carried no echo from the stone. It was plain, living, and his.

"Delta Vonnfield."

David repeated it carefully. "Delta Vonnfield."

Her name sounded strange in his voice, as though it had traveled farther than she had.

"Do you know what year it is, Delta?"

She looked toward the glowing signs at the end of the street. "No."

His concern deepened. “Do you know where your family is?”

“My father is dying.”

“Where?”

Delta looked up at towers that could not have existed in Vonnfield. “A very long way from here.”

David lowered his hands, though he kept a respectful distance. “Is someone chasing you?”

Fortier. Renaud. Centuries.

“They cannot have followed where the stone carried me.”

David glanced at the dagger again. “What stone?”

Delta’s hand moved protectively to her chest.

The crystal pulsed beneath her fingers.

David inhaled sharply. His eyes lost focus for an instant. Somewhere far behind his expression, a dark forest opened and vanished.

“Did you hear that?” he asked.

“Hear what?”

He listened to the rain. “A song.”

Delta’s heartbeat stumbled. “What song?”

“I don’t know. It was only a few notes.”

The stone had brought her to him.

That certainty frightened her more than the roaring vehicles.

David bent slowly and retrieved his tool bag. “Look, I live three blocks from here with my mother. She’s home. She’s sensible, and she will be much better at this conversation than I am. You can dry off, eat something, and decide whether you want medical help after that.”

Delta searched his face for deception.

Hans had once said, Look into my eyes. I see you.

David did not know those words. Still, he allowed her to look without impatience. He did not approach the dagger, demand obedience, or call men to restrain her.

“Your mother will receive an armed stranger into her house?” Delta asked.

“She raised me. Her standards are flexible.”

Despite everything, a small, startled laugh escaped Delta.

David smiled, and the expression transformed him. Hans had smiled rarely, as though joy were something precious he guarded. David’s smile arrived easily, warm and crooked.

The difference steadied her.

He was not a ghost.

“You walk ahead,” Delta said, lowering the dagger but not putting it away. “I will follow.”

“Fair. But the pointy end stays down.”

He picked up an umbrella that had fallen beside the curb, opened it, and held it so most of the shelter covered her rather than him.

They began along the wet sidewalk.

At each crossing, David explained the lights before they changed. He did not touch her again, but he remained between Delta and the traffic without appearing to notice he had done so.

The stone kept time with his steps.

Delta did not say Francheska.

That name still belonged to the man beneath the oak, and she did not yet know why Hans’s song had led her to David’s door.

Chapter 26: David's Mother

Martha opened the townhouse door before David found his key.

She was a small woman with silver beginning at her temples and reading glasses hanging from a cord around her neck. Her gaze moved from David's soaked jacket to Delta's ruined dress, bare hands, and lowered dagger.

"David," she said, "why is there an armed woman on my steps?"

"A truck nearly hit her. She doesn't know where she is, and she won't let me call an ambulance."

Martha looked directly at Delta. "Is he telling me the truth?"

"He prevented the iron carriage from killing me."

Martha accepted this without visible surprise. "Then you may come inside after the dagger goes on that table. It will remain where you can see it, and no one will touch it."

Delta studied her. This woman did not speak like a servant or a courtier. She offered shelter as a condition between equals.

Delta placed the dagger on the narrow table inside the door.

"Good," Martha said. "Shoes off. Both of you are flooding the hall."

Within minutes, Delta was wrapped in a thick fleece blanket at the kitchen table. Warm yellow light shone from glass bulbs overhead. A blue flame appeared at Martha's touch beneath the stove, so sudden that Delta drew back.

"Gas," David explained as he set his wet tool bag by the radiator. "Useful when it behaves."

Martha placed a mug in Delta's hands. Steam carried the scent of cinnamon and apple.

"Small sip first," she said. "If you are nauseated or dizzy, tell me."

The drink was sweeter than palace cider and hot enough to hurt. Delta drank anyway.

Martha warmed chicken stew while David found a first-aid box. He knelt beside Delta's chair and paused before touching the cut at her knee.

"May I?"

The question startled her. Palace physicians asked the king, her governess, or her attendants. Rarely her.

Delta nodded.

David cleaned the cut with gentle efficiency. His hands were broader than Hans's had been, marked by small burns and pale scars from tools. When Delta flinched, he stopped immediately.

"You work with your hands," she said.

"Carpentry and repairs. Mostly old houses that object to remaining upright."

"You build shelter."

"On good days. On bad days, I argue with plumbing."

Martha set a bowl of stew before Delta. "Eat before he explains plumbing. It ruins the appetite."

Their easy affection made Delta's throat tighten. She thought of her father calling her little bird and wondered whether he had survived the dawn.

Martha sat across from her. "Delta, I need to ask a few questions. You can refuse, but I need to know how to keep you safe. Did someone hurt you?"

Delta looked at the bruises around her wrists. "Yes."

"A family member? A partner?"

"Duke Fortier, my father's adopted cousin. He poisoned the king and murdered my knight."

David stopped closing the first-aid box.

Martha's expression remained calm. "Tell us from the beginning."

So Delta did.

She spoke of Vonnfield, Queen Fiona's stone, and King James lying beneath the carved canopy. She described the royal ballet, Fortier's confession, the chase through the forest, and Hans beneath the oak. When she reached the golden passage through time, words became more difficult. Nothing in this kitchen belonged to the world she described, yet both listeners allowed her to finish.

Martha folded her hands. "What year was it when you left?"

Delta gave the year according to the Vonnfield calendar.

David searched it on his phone. No result appeared. He tried the kingdom's name, King James, and Duke Fortier. The glowing screen offered businesses, old family names, and unrelated histories, but no realm of Vonnfield.

"That proves nothing," Delta said. "You may have forgotten us."

"It proves I can't confirm it," David replied. "That's different."

She appreciated the precision, even though it frightened her.

Martha said, "I have heard people describe impossible things after trauma. Sometimes the mind gives terror a story it can survive. I have also lived long enough to know that the world is larger than what I personally understand."

Delta tightened the blanket around herself. "You do not believe me."

"I believe you are frightened, injured, and telling us what you believe to be true. That is enough for tonight."

There was no pity in the answer.

David leaned against the counter. "Can we see the stone?"

Delta's hand covered it through the fabric of her dress. "Not yet."

"Also fair."

Martha found clean clothes in a box kept for visiting relatives: soft trousers, a long shirt, and a knitted sweater. She showed Delta the bathroom, explained the taps, and waited outside while Delta changed.

In the mirror, Delta scarcely recognized herself. The modern clothes removed every visible sign of rank. Without velvet, silver, or the royal circlet, she looked like the hidden woman Hans had named in the garden.

Francheska had crossed time, even if Princess Delta had not.

When she returned to the kitchen, David had placed her dagger inside an open wooden box on the table. It remained within reach, exactly as Martha had promised.

“The guest room is upstairs,” Martha said. “The door locks from the inside. No one will enter without knocking. Tomorrow, we can discuss a doctor, records, and how to find whatever can be found. Tonight, you sleep.”

Delta looked between mother and son.

“Why are you helping me?”

Martha answered first. “Because someone should.”

David shrugged. “And because you threatened me with a museum piece after I saved your life. I’m invested now.”

Delta almost smiled.

That night, she placed Fiona’s stone beneath the pillow and lay awake listening to the unfamiliar hum of electricity in the walls.

Across the hall, David moved through the house with a step she had never heard before.

Still, some ancient part of her knew exactly when he was near.

Chapter 27: A Melody From Nowhere

The next morning, Martha taught Delta how to make toast.

The machine frightened her less than the gas flame had, though she did draw the dagger when the bread sprang upward without warning. Martha laughed so warmly that Delta eventually laughed too.

By afternoon, the house no longer seemed alive with trapped spirits. Electricity was a current carried through wires. The refrigerator was a cold cupboard. The voices inside the television belonged to distant performers whose images had been captured and transmitted.

Understanding the words did not make the world less miraculous.

David left early for a repair job and returned carrying two paper bags of groceries. Delta sat by the front window in Martha's borrowed clothes, watching an endless procession of cars move through the rain.

He kicked the door closed behind him and called, "I bought half the store because Mom refused to tell me what people from vanished kingdoms eat."

"Food," Martha answered from upstairs. "They eat food."

David carried the bags into the kitchen.

Without realizing it, he began to hum.

Delta's hand tightened around the mug in her lap.

The melody rose through the house, quiet and precise.

Look into my eyes, let the shadows clear...

The mug slipped from her fingers and shattered on the floor.

David stopped.

Delta was already standing. "Where did you hear that song?"

“What song?”

“The melody you were humming. Who taught it to you?”

Her voice came out sharper than she intended. David set the grocery bags down and kept his hands visible, remembering the alley.

“Nobody. I’ve hummed it for years.”

“That is impossible.”

Martha appeared at the foot of the stairs. “What’s happened?”

“The tune,” David said. “The one I used to hum as a kid. She knows it.”

Martha looked at Delta, and the color changed in her face.

“You heard it before?” Delta asked her.

“David began humming it when he was four or five. Usually in his sleep.” Martha came into the kitchen slowly. “He had nightmares about a forest. When I woke him, he could never remember the dream, only the melody.”

Delta stepped around the broken cup. “Hum it again.”

David hesitated, then began from the first phrase.

The notes were unmistakable. He did not sing them exactly as Hans had. David’s rhythm was looser, touched by the music of his own century, but the heart of the song remained unchanged.

Delta joined him with the words.

“I saw heaven through the morning light,
I heard mercy in the quiet night.
Every road I walked, every dark disguise,
Led me to the angels in your eyes.”

David’s voice failed on the final line.

He gripped the edge of the counter. “I know those words.”

“You have heard them?”

“No.” He pressed one hand to his temple. “That’s the problem. I knew what you were going to sing before you sang it.”

Fiona's stone flared beneath Delta's sweater.

Golden light shone through the fabric and filled the kitchen.

Martha caught the back of a chair. David stared at Delta's chest, then deliberately lifted his eyes to her face.

Delta drew out the crystal.

"This is what carried me here," she said. "It followed the song."

The stone pulsed toward David.

He took one involuntary step closer. In its surface, light gathered into the shape of dark branches and falling rain.

"Hans wrote that melody for me," Delta continued. "He sang it the night before Fortier destroyed us. No one in this world could know it."

David looked from the stone to his mother. "You said there was no record of Vonnfield."

"There isn't," Martha whispered.

"Then either we are all having the same breakdown, or something in that story is standing in our kitchen."

Delta held the stone carefully between both palms. "Hans died with it against his heart. It kept my memories of him. Perhaps it kept something of him too."

David's expression closed. "You think I'm a dead man."

"No." The answer came immediately. "You are David. I know that much, even if I understand nothing else."

He searched her face.

"Then why did it bring you to me?"

"Because some part of his song survived in you."

Silence settled over the kitchen.

Martha took the broom from the pantry and began gathering the broken mug, not because the moment was ordinary but because someone had to keep bare feet away from glass.

David gave a breath that was almost a laugh. “That is the most Mom response possible to evidence of reincarnation.”

“The universe may rearrange itself after the floor is safe.”

The familiar exchange eased the fear in his face.

David looked at the stone again. “Can it show us?”

Delta remembered the force of the memories it had returned and the pain of the forest. “It may. But it does not show only what we wish to see.”

“I have spent my life humming a song no one taught me and dreaming about a place that does not exist.” He extended his hand, stopping before he touched the crystal. “I think I would rather know what I’m afraid of.”

Delta looked at Martha.

Martha set the broom aside and stood beside her son. “Whatever happens, you come back as David.”

“That’s the plan.”

Delta placed the stone on the kitchen table between them.

Its light reached for his waiting hand.

Chapter 28: The Stone Between Their Hands

David sat across from Delta at the kitchen table.

Fiona's stone rested between them, casting gold across the wood grain. Martha stood at her son's shoulder with one hand on the back of his chair.

"What do I do?" David asked.

"Touch it only if you choose to," Delta said. "The stone answers emotion more readily than command. If you want it to stop, hold to your own name."

"David," he said, testing the anchor. "David Mercer. Born in this city. Raised in this house. Terrible at remembering birthdays."

"My birthday," Martha said.

"Other birthdays."

His humor could not hide the fear in his hands.

Delta placed her fingertips on one side of the crystal. "I will be there."

David reached across the table.

Their fingers touched the stone at the same instant.

Light tore through the room.

David gasped and vanished from the kitchen.

He stood on a training field beneath a pale autumn sky. A wooden sword struck his shoulder. A stern man with Hans's eyes ordered him to rise again.

Phillip Foulter, David knew without being told.

The boy inside the memory rose.

The scene changed. Plum blossoms drifted around a fountain. A little girl bent over a wounded sparrow, speaking to it with solemn

tenderness. Wonder filled the watching boy so completely that David felt it as his own.

She is an angel talking.

Another memory opened before he could breathe. Hans carried Delta across a flooded stream while she laughed against his shoulder. He stood behind her throne through hours of ceremony and knew the exact instant weariness entered her posture. He waited in the white-rose garden because it was the only place where both of them could exist without titles.

David felt years of love compressed into flashes.

Then rain struck his face.

The ancient oak towered above him. Pain burned through his shoulder, side, and chest. He was on one knee with blood filling his lungs. Men dragged Delta away while she reached toward him.

David tried to call her name.

Hans's dying body shaped the sound.

Francheska.

The blade entered beneath his breastplate again.

David screamed.

The kitchen returned in fragments. He fell backward, overturning the chair. Martha caught his shoulders before his head struck the floor. Delta released the stone, and the golden light collapsed.

For several seconds, David could not draw breath.

"Look at me," Martha said. She held his face between her hands. "Tell me your name."

His eyes found hers.

"David."

"Full name."

"David Mercer."

"Where are you?"

"Home. In the kitchen."

Martha pulled him against her. He held on with the helplessness of a child waking from a nightmare.

Delta remained across from them, her own face wet with tears. She had felt the memories move through him, but she had not known he would endure Hans's death as though the blade entered his living body.

"I am sorry," she said. "I should not have allowed it."

David shook his head. "I asked."

He sat on the floor until his breathing steadied. The scarless skin beneath his shirt ached where Hans had been stabbed.

"I saw her," he whispered. "You. At the fountain. In the garden."

Delta closed her fingers around the edge of the table.

"They were his memories," she said.

"They felt like mine."

"Feeling them does not make you less yourself."

David looked at the stone. Its light had dimmed, as though it too understood the harm of opening too much at once.

"Was I him?"

Delta considered the question carefully. She wanted to say yes. Grief wanted to gather every difference between them and call it disguise. But David had trusted her with his identity before touching the stone.

"I don't know what the soul keeps when it enters another life," she answered. "The song survived. His instinct to protect survived. Perhaps his love left a path. But those memories belong to a man who died, and this life belongs to you."

Martha looked at Delta with quiet gratitude.

David climbed back into the chair. "He loved you."

"Yes."

"And you loved him."

"With everything I was."

The answer hurt him in a place that did not feel entirely new.

“I remember that,” he said.

Delta’s heart moved toward him, but she did not cross the space between them.

“A memory is not a promise you owe me.”

David looked up sharply.

“Whatever Hans felt, you are free to feel differently,” she continued. “I will not ask you to carry a dead man’s devotion as a duty.”

“He didn’t think it was duty.”

The certainty in David’s voice surprised them both.

Fiona’s stone pulsed once.

David placed his hand near it but did not touch. “There was more behind the memories. A locked place.”

“Then it should remain locked until you choose otherwise.”

He nodded.

Martha set the fallen chair upright. “No more magical relics before dinner.”

David laughed weakly, and the sound returned him fully to the room.

Delta watched him help his mother gather the scattered groceries. Hans had moved with quiet discipline even when wounded. David muttered at rolling onions and made Martha smile.

The soul might continue.

The person was new.

For the first time, Delta understood that finding Hans again would require her to know David rather than search past him.

Chapter 29: The Same Protective Heart

For the next two days, David taught Delta how to move through the modern city.

He began with traffic lights, door locks, money, and the emergency number she should call if they became separated. He wrote Martha's address on a card and made Delta keep it in her pocket.

"Even queens get lost," he said.

"I am a princess."

"Then you can get lost with less authority."

Delta learned to recognize teasing in his voice.

David did not possess Hans's formal restraint. He spoke his thoughts before polishing them and laughed at his own mistakes. When a cabinet door came loose in Martha's kitchen, he repaired it while continuing three conversations at once. He filled silence easily where Hans had guarded it.

Yet the difference did not diminish the familiar qualities beneath.

At a crowded market, an angry customer shouted at an elderly cashier. David stepped beside the woman and calmly redirected the man's anger until security arrived. He did not draw attention to what he had done. Later, when Delta mentioned it, he shrugged.

"He knew she couldn't answer him the way he deserved. People like that choose whoever has the least room to fight back."

Hans would have understood.

On the second morning, David took Delta to the townhouse he was repairing. The old brick building had sagged away from its own staircase. He showed her how he measured each piece of timber before cutting it and how a structure could be strengthened without destroying what time had given it.

"You do not replace everything that is old," Delta observed.

“Old doesn’t mean broken. Sometimes it means the builders knew more than we do.”

She touched the worn banister. “And when it is broken?”

“You find what can still bear weight and build from there.”

The answer followed her long after they left.

In the afternoon, they walked through a small park near the river. Delta wore Martha’s long coat, and her braided hair drew less attention than the velvet gown had. Children chased pigeons beside a fountain. For the first time since crossing time, the city did not feel entirely hostile.

A bicycle shot around the curve behind them.

David heard the bell and moved before Delta did. He stepped between her and the bicycle, one arm across her shoulders, taking the rider’s angry shout as the wheels skimmed past his coat.

The gesture was exact.

Hans beneath the oak. Hans before the winter hound. Hans turning his body into a shield.

Delta went cold.

She caught David’s jacket with both hands. “Do not do that again.”

“Let a bicycle hit you?”

“Place yourself between me and every danger as though your life matters less.”

David looked down at her hands. “I didn’t think about it.”

“That is what frightens me.”

The fear she had held since the kitchen visions finally surfaced. “I watched him die because he believed protecting me was the only purpose of his life. I will not watch you repeat it.”

David’s expression softened, but he did not pretend the words belonged only to Hans.

“My mother says I’ve been stepping into trouble since I could walk. That’s mine too.”

“Then yours is the habit I am asking you to change.”

He considered this with more seriousness than she expected.

“All right,” he said. “I can protect someone without deciding for them. And you can warn me before attacking a bicycle with a royal dagger.”

Delta realized her hand had moved toward the concealed weapon beneath her coat.

“Agreed.”

They sat on a bench overlooking the river.

David watched the water for a while. “The memories haven’t come back again.”

“Are you relieved?”

“Partly.” He rubbed the center of his chest where Hans’s final wound had ached. “Partly I feel like there’s a room inside me with someone standing behind the door.”

“You do not have to open it.”

“I know. That’s why I may be able to.”

Delta looked at him.

Hans had lived under vows made by kings, fathers, and rank. David needed the freedom Hans had never possessed. Perhaps the soul had returned not only to love again, but to choose.

“What happens if we find a way to send you home?” David asked.

“I save my father and stop Fortier.”

“I meant after that.”

The question held more than practical concern.

Delta answered honestly. “I do not know whether the stone can return me. I do not know whether time has continued without me or whether everyone I love has been dead for centuries.”

“If there’s a road back, we’ll find it.”

“We?”

“You arrived in my alley carrying a magic rock and several political murders. I’m invested, remember?”

She smiled.

David began humming “Angels in Your Eyes” under his breath. Delta joined him without words. Their voices found harmony more easily than either expected.

The stone rested quietly against her heart.

It did not flare or force another memory. It simply warmed, as though recognizing something being created in the present rather than recovered from the past.

When they returned home, Martha reminded David that her prescription would be ready at the pharmacy the following evening.

“I’ll pick it up after work,” he promised.

Delta watched him hang his jacket beside the door.

She no longer saw only the shadow of the knight she had lost.

She saw David: impatient, funny, kind, alive.

That difference had begun to matter as much as everything the stone remembered.

Part Five: The Man Who Remembers

Chapter 30: The Trap

The following evening, Delta accompanied David to the pharmacy.

She recognized the route now: the bakery with its steamed windows, the crossing where a voice told pedestrians to wait, the narrow arcade beside the chemist's shop. Familiarity had begun to give the city a shape she could hold in her mind.

At the pharmacy door, David glanced at her.

"Coming in?"

"I would rather stay out here."

Behind the glass, people stood shoulder to shoulder beneath a hard white light. Outside, the evening air smelled of rain and fresh bread.

"All right. They have it ready. I shouldn't be long."

"I know where you are."

He smiled at that and went inside.

Delta stood near the arcade entrance, watching the changing signals at the crossing. A little boy pressed the button twice before his mother caught his hand. Somewhere within the covered passage, a machine played the same few bright notes again and again.

Then a door opened beside her.

Three men emerged from the bar adjoining the arcade. One remained by the door while the others stepped onto the pavement. Delta moved aside to let them pass.

The taller man stopped in front of her.

"Waiting for someone?"

"Yes."

"Could wait inside."

"No, thank you."

She turned toward the pharmacy. He moved with her.

Through the window, she could see David at the counter, his back to the street.

“Excuse me,” she said.

The man looked down at the small bag Martha had lent her.

“What have you got in there?”

Delta drew the strap closer to her shoulder. The second man drifted behind her, cutting off the direct path to the pharmacy.

She understood their positions before she understood why they had chosen her.

The arcade lay open at her back. Retreating into it would take her farther from David and the people beyond the glass.

She stayed where she was.

“Move aside.”

The tall man’s smile thinned.

“Only asking.”

“Then you have my answer.”

Her dagger rested beneath her coat. She could feel its weight against her side, but she remembered David’s warning about weapons in this world. Drawing it would change what happened next.

She raised her voice.

“I do not know these men. Will someone fetch the man inside the pharmacy?”

A woman near the crossing turned.

The tall man seized Delta’s wrist.

She twisted toward the opening in his grip, as Hans had once taught her. His fingers slipped, then tightened on her sleeve.

“Let go.”

Behind him, the pharmacy door opened.

Chapter 31: History Repeats

David came out carrying a small paper bag.

He saw the man's hand on Delta before he saw her face.

"Take your hand off her."

His voice was loud enough to turn heads along the pavement.

The man glanced around. Delta pulled against his grip, and for one instant his attention divided.

David stepped between them and knocked the man's arm aside.

"Inside," he said to Delta. "Go into the shop."

The second man shoved him against the arcade wall.

The medicine fell from his hand.

Something broke beneath a shoe.

At the sound, the street shifted.

David smelled wet leaves.

For a moment the pressure against his shoulder was an arrow, the brick behind him the rough bark of an oak. A voice shouted somewhere beyond his sight. He knew that voice. He knew what would happen if he failed to rise.

He pushed away from the wall.

"David."

Delta had not gone into the pharmacy.

She stood near its open door, one hand braced against the frame. Behind her, the pharmacist was reaching for a telephone.

"David. Look at me."

The man in front of him swung.

David turned just enough for the blow to glance along his cheek. His body seemed to know where to put its weight, but the movement came too quickly, without balance. He stumbled against a metal bin.

The man reached for him again.

Delta caught David's sleeve and pulled him toward the light.

"This way."

He heard her, yet another command rose beneath her voice.

Stay between them. Hold until she is safe.

The familiar certainty frightened him more than the fist had.

Delta saw him hesitate.

"We leave together," she said.

The taller man lunged after them. David shoved the bin into his path, buying a few stumbling steps.

At the bar door, the third man backed away.

"Leave it," he muttered to his companions. "People are watching."

But the second man had picked up a bottle.

He struck it against the edge of the wall.

Delta heard the glass break.

Beneath her coat, Fiona's stone grew hot.

Chapter 32: Francheska

The broken bottle caught the light as the man raised it.

David saw the wrist before the glass.

A memory moved through him: a training yard, his father's hand correcting the angle of his arm, the sharp humiliation of being knocked down because he had watched the weapon instead of the man.

He stepped aside.

The bottle tore through his jacket sleeve. Pain scored his forearm.

He caught the attacker's wrist long enough to push it away, then released him and retreated through the pharmacy door with Delta.

The pharmacist pulled the door shut behind them and turned the lock.

For a few seconds, the man stood outside with the bottle hanging at his side. His companion tugged at his shoulder. Across the street, someone held up a phone.

They disappeared around the corner.

David bent forward, hands on his knees.

The pharmacy floor was white beneath his shoes.

He fixed his attention on that.

White floor. Rubber soles. The bell above the door still trembling.

Then the leaves returned.

He felt rain slipping beneath a breastplate. His mouth filled with the memory of blood. Across a clearing, Delta struggled against the men dragging her away.

His body here was breathing.

His body there could not.

"David."

Delta crouched in front of him.

He stared at her hand on his sleeve. There was blood on the fabric, but not enough for what he remembered. Not nearly enough.

“Tell me where you are,” she said.

He tried.

The words would not come.

She placed his uninjured hand against the cool metal edge of a shelf.

“Here. Feel this.”

He closed his fingers around it.

Behind her, the pharmacist spoke into the telephone. A woman was saying that she had seen the men leave.

The sounds reached him slowly.

Delta’s face remained close.

“Francheska,” he whispered.

Her hand went still.

The name had passed through him in the kitchen as part of a dying man’s pain. Now he remembered speaking it in sunlight, in the garden, against her hair. He remembered waiting for her to turn whenever he said it softly.

Delta drew a breath that shook.

“Yes,” she said. “I am here.”

He looked at her with such grief that she almost reached for Hans’s name.

Instead, she tightened her hand around his.

“And you are David. Stay here with me.”

He shut his eyes.

“David Mercer.”

The metal shelf was cold beneath his palm.

When he opened his eyes again, the forest had gone.

Chapter 33: She Is an Angel Talking

They returned to Martha's house later that evening.

The police had taken their account. David's arm had been cleaned and dressed, and the pharmacist had replaced the medicine bag crushed on the pavement. Delta remembered very little of the walk home except the effort it took to keep from holding David's sleeve.

Martha met them in the hall.

"What happened?"

"Three men outside the pharmacy," David said. "They're gone. We spoke to the police."

Her eyes moved to the dressing beneath his torn sleeve.

"How bad?"

"A cut."

"I'll decide how reassured to be after I've seen it."

He handed her the medicine.

The ordinary little gesture nearly undid Delta.

He had gone out for something his mother needed. There should have been nothing more to the evening than his coming home with it.

Martha examined the dressing, then made them sit at the kitchen table. She put water before them and waited until David had taken a drink.

"There was something else," she said.

He looked at Delta.

"The memories came back."

Martha sat down.

"All of them?"

"I don't know."

His uninjured hand rested on the table. Delta watched his fingers, waiting for them to tremble.

"In the kitchen, it was like being pulled through someone else's life," he said. "Tonight I remembered things before I saw them. I knew what came next."

He looked toward the window.

"I remember my father teaching me to stand after a fall."

Martha lowered her eyes.

David reached for her hand.

"I remember you teaching me to ride a bicycle too."

She held on to him.

"Good," she said, though her voice had changed.

They sat quietly until the kettle began to boil.

Later, Martha carried her tea into the sitting room, leaving the kitchen door open.

Delta remained across the table from David.

"Does it hurt?" she asked.

"My arm?"

"The remembering."

He considered the question.

"Some of it."

She nodded.

"I keep seeing the fountain," he said. "That bird in your hands."

"The sparrow."

"You were explaining to it that being frightened would make its wing worse."

"I was a child."

"You were very certain it ought to listen."

A laugh escaped her, small and unsteady.

David smiled, then looked down.

“My father wanted me to pay attention to the muster. I couldn’t stop watching you.”

Delta knew what he had said that day. She had heard it again through the stone. Yet she needed to hear how the memory lived in him now.

“What did you tell him?”

David lifted his eyes.

“She is an angel talking.”

She pressed her fingers to her mouth.

For years, Hans had remembered the little girl beside the fountain when the court could see only its future queen. Hearing the words in David’s voice brought both faces before her, and for a moment she could not bear how dearly she wanted them to be one.

“Hans?”

David’s eyes filled.

“I was Hans,” he said. “But I am still David.”

She nodded, though tears had begun to fall.

“I know.”

“I remember loving you.”

The words left him slowly.

Delta waited.

“And I know I wanted you to stay before I understood why I knew that song.”

She looked at him.

He gave a strained little smile.

“I haven’t worked out what to do with all of this.”

“You do not have to tonight.”

He reached across the table, stopping with his hand open between them.

Delta placed hers in it.

His thumb moved over her knuckles. Hans had touched her carefully, conscious even in private of all the things that forbade him. David watched her openly.

She rose and went around the table.

When he stood, she held him.

His injured arm settled lightly against her back. She could feel his breathing, the warmth of his cheek against her temple.

“I was afraid,” she whispered.

“I know.”

“I could not watch it happen again.”

He drew back enough to see her face.

“You got us through the door.”

“You came back when I called.”

He rested his forehead against hers.

For a while, neither moved.

Between them, Fiona’s stone began to warm.

Chapter 34: The Kingdom in the Stone

Delta stepped back and drew the crystal from beneath her coat.

Light spread across her palm.

David glanced toward the sitting room.

“Mum.”

Martha appeared in the doorway as the kitchen faded behind a veil of gold.

Within it, Delta saw her father’s chamber.

The bed curtains had been drawn aside. James lay motionless beneath the coverlet, one hand open beside him. Fortier stood at a small table, bending over a document while a servant held a candle.

Beyond the windows, the sky was pale.

Delta moved closer.

“Father?”

The image gave no sign that he heard.

Fortier straightened and handed the document to someone beyond the edge of the light.

The chamber vanished.

Now there were men in the palace courtyard. Knights knelt with their wrists bound. A guard hauled one upright, and Delta recognized the silver in Sir Phillip’s hair.

David’s breath caught.

Before either could speak, the vision shifted again.

Mathew stood at the foot of a narrow stair, sword drawn. Blood marked his brow. He glanced behind him toward the lower armory, then raised his blade as a shadow crossed the wall.

The stone went dark.

The kitchen returned.

Delta gripped the edge of the table.

"The council," she said. "Fortier meant to take it at sunrise."

"Was that now?" David asked.

"I don't know."

She looked toward the kitchen window. Night lay against the glass.

For days she had wondered whether her father was already centuries beyond her reach. Now she had seen him breathing.

"It may be showing me what happened after I left," she said. "Or what is happening there while we stand here."

Martha came to the table.

"Can it take you back?"

Delta looked at the stone.

"I must try."

David pulled out the chair beside her and sat.

"Then we need the armory."

She turned to him.

"I know the room," he continued. "There's a passage behind the eastern weapons rack. If Mathew can hold the stair—"

"David."

He stopped.

She looked at Martha, then back at him.

"You have a life here."

"I know."

"You do not know whether you can return."

His gaze dropped to the bandage on his arm.

"No."

Martha remained very still.

Delta wanted him beside her so badly that she could scarcely speak. Beyond the stone lay her father, her home, and the men who had killed Hans. Here stood the woman who had raised David and opened her door to a stranger.

“I will not ask you to leave her,” Delta said.

David looked at his mother.

For the first time that evening, he seemed at a loss for words.

Martha drew out a chair.

“Do you want to go,” she asked, “or do you feel you have to?”

He took time to answer.

“I’m frightened of what happens if I do.”

“That wasn’t my question.”

“I want to help her.” He looked at Delta. “And I remember those people. I can’t make them strangers again.”

Martha rubbed her thumb along the edge of the table.

“When you were little, I could usually see the trouble you were getting into from the kitchen window.”

David tried to smile.

“I wasn’t always in trouble.”

“No. Sometimes you were asleep.”

Her mouth trembled.

He knelt beside her chair, and she put both hands against his face.

“Come home if you can.”

“I will.”

She pulled him close.

Delta turned away, giving them what privacy the small room allowed.

When Martha released him, she rose and fetched his work bag. She emptied out the tools, leaving a flashlight, then added clean dressings and the small first-aid kit.

David watched her.

“Mum—”

“Your arm will still need looking after wherever you are.”

He accepted the bag.

Delta stepped toward her.

“I cannot promise to keep him safe.”

“No,” Martha said. “You can’t.”

“I can promise he will not be the only one trying.”

Martha took her hand briefly.

“Then look after each other.”

Delta returned to the table and lifted the stone.

She thought of the lower armory: cold flagstones, iron hinges, the passage behind the weapons rack. She had hidden there as a child. Hans had found her by the sound of her laughter.

The crystal brightened.

A narrow line of gold appeared in the air.

Beyond it came the scrape of steel.

David stood beside her, his work bag over his shoulder.

Delta offered her hand.

“If it opens, stay close.”

He took it.

“Beside you?”

She tightened her grip.

“Beside me.”

The light widened until they could see the armory floor.

Together, they stepped toward it.

Part Six: Return to Vonnfield

Chapter 35: The Princess Returns

Cold air struck Delta's face.

She stumbled onto stone, still holding David's hand. Behind them, the kitchen remained visible through a narrowing seam of gold. Martha stood beside the table with one hand pressed against her mouth.

Then the light closed.

The armory smelled of oil, iron, and damp wool.

Delta knew that smell. She had carried it on her clothes after childhood afternoons spent watching Hans train. For three days she had wondered whether everything familiar to her had vanished centuries ago.

Now the palace stood around her.

A blade struck stone beyond the door.

David turned toward the sound.

"Mathew."

Delta caught his arm before he moved.

They listened.

Boots scraped across the passage. Someone gasped with effort. A man outside ordered another to circle through the lower stair.

Delta drew the bolt across the armory's side entrance, cutting off that approach.

David went to the weapons rack.

His hand hovered over a longsword, then moved to a shorter blade. He lifted it cautiously, testing the weight. When he turned his wrist, pain tightened his mouth.

"The memories know more than my arm does," he said.

"Then listen to your arm."

He nodded and took a small shield.

Delta found a sword she could manage. She had held blades before, but never with the certainty Hans had possessed. Its weight pulled at her shoulder.

Beyond the door came another blow.

“Mathew!” she called. “The armory!”

A moment of silence.

“Your Highness?”

“Come through!”

David lifted the latch.

Mathew fell backward into the room, barely keeping his feet. Delta caught his cloak as David shoved the door closed against a sword thrust. The blade scraped through the gap, withdrew, and the bolt dropped into place.

For several heartbeats, the three of them listened to the pounding outside.

Then Mathew turned.

Blood ran from a cut above his eye.

He stared at Delta.

“They said you had burned.”

She still held his cloak.

“They were mistaken.”

His sword lowered.

Delta had imagined returning with certainty—with answers, with power she understood. Instead, her knees trembled, and the stone lay dull and cold against her palm.

But Mathew was alive.

She reached for the wound at his brow.

“How many are outside?”

“Three on this stair. More above.”

“Then show us the passage.”

Chapter 36: Mathew's Recognition

Mathew did not move.

His gaze had settled on David.

The unfamiliar clothes, the work bag, the white dressing showing beneath a torn sleeve: none belonged in the royal armory.

"Who is he?"

"Someone who came to help," Delta said.

David lowered his sword.

Mathew stepped between him and the princess.

"Your name."

"David Mercer."

"Whose man are you?"

David glanced at Delta.

"My own."

The pounding at the door resumed.

Mathew raised his blade.

Delta could have ordered him aside. She saw how exhausted he was, how much betrayal had passed through the palace wearing a familiar face.

"David came with me," she said. "I trust him."

David was looking at the gray clasp on Mathew's cloak.

"You covered him," he said quietly.

Mathew's expression changed.

"Beneath the oak. You left your cloak over him."

Delta turned toward David.

His face had gone pale.

"I remember the rain stopping against my cheek. I thought—"

He broke off.

Mathew's sword wavered.

"What did he ask me to do?"

"Take the stone to her. When she was alone."

"She could have told you that."

David nodded.

"She could."

He looked down at Mathew's empty hand.

"You tried to stop the bleeding. I caught your wrist because you wouldn't listen."

Mathew stopped breathing for a moment.

"Tell her Hans said," David whispered, "I love you, Delta."

The words remained between them.

Then Mathew shook his head.

"No."

"I know."

"I held him."

David's eyes filled.

"I remember."

A heavy crash shook the door.

Delta flinched. Mathew looked toward it, then back at the stranger.

He did not kneel or embrace him. His grief was too new, and the face before him too unfamiliar.

But he lowered his sword.

"There's a latch behind the eastern rack."

David turned toward it.

Mathew caught his sleeve.

"If this is cruelty—"

“It isn’t,” Delta said.

Mathew looked at her for a long moment.

Then he helped David move the rack.

Chapter 37: The Loyalists

The passage opened beneath the old chapel.

Twelve soldiers waited there with drawn weapons. Two were wounded. A kitchen boy sat beside a basket of bread, clutching a carving knife in both hands.

When Delta emerged, no one spoke.

Then an older guard bowed his head.

“Your Highness.”

The others followed.

“Please stand,” she said. “We have little time.”

Mathew spread a stolen watch roster on a stone bench.

Fortier’s men held the great hall, the main gates, and the royal stair. The council had begun assembling. Sir Phillip and several officers of the Sovereign Shield were imprisoned in the old guardroom beside the courtyard.

Delta touched the place on the roster.

“How many guarding them?”

“Four,” Mathew said. “The prisoners have no weapons.”

“And the king?”

“Alive when I last heard.”

She closed her eyes briefly.

David stood beside the bench, studying the passages marked beneath the roster.

“The old guardroom has a hatch into the fuel cellar.”

Mathew looked at him.

“It was sealed.”

“The upper door was. The cellar opening is behind the wood bins.”

Delta remembered Hans coming home covered in soot after a winter exercise. His father had made the trainees find their way through the palace without using a single public stair.

She chose six soldiers to accompany Mathew.

“Free the prisoners. Take weapons through the cellar. Once Sir Phillip is safe, secure the servants’ yard.”

“And Fortier?” the older guard asked.

“We cut him off from the king first.”

She pointed to two men near the chapel door.

“Find the royal physician. Bring him under guard, but do not harm him. Anyone carrying medicines to my father is to be stopped.”

The kitchen boy rose.

“My sister works in the royal pantry. She can open the lower door.”

“What is your name?”

“Tomas.”

“Can you reach her safely?”

He nodded.

“Then ask her. If the passage is watched, come back.”

His grip loosened on the carving knife.

Delta looked around the chamber.

“Fortier has told you I was taken, that Sir Hans betrayed the crown, and that my father placed this palace in his hands. I will answer those lies before the council. First, we must keep the people who can answer with me alive.”

The older guard straightened.

“What are your orders?”

“No revenge. Accept surrender. Keep the servants clear of the fighting.”

She looked at Mathew.

“Bring them back.”

He bowed once and led his men into the passage.

David waited until the last had gone.

“You sound like your father.”

Delta folded the roster.

“I hope he lives long enough to disagree with me.”

Chapter 38: Father and Daughter

Tomas's sister opened the pantry door with flour on her sleeves.

She pressed a hand over her mouth when she saw Delta, then stepped aside.

"The physician is in the dressing room," she whispered. "They brought him up with a bottle."

Two blue-coated guards stood beyond the pantry.

One reached for his sword when Delta entered. David raised his shield, and the older loyalist struck the weapon from the man's hand. The second guard looked at the princess, then at the soldiers behind her.

"Put it down," Delta said.

He obeyed.

In the dressing room, the physician stood beside a tray.

A dark glass bottle rested beneath his hand.

"Step away from it."

He turned. His face crumpled with relief or fear; Delta could not tell which.

"Your Highness—"

"Have you given him this dose?"

"No."

"Take him downstairs," she told the guard. "Keep the bottle and the cup."

The physician caught the edge of the table.

"His heart is failing."

"Then you should have called for help before now."

"They threatened my children."

Delta looked at him.

For a moment she saw only the man who had lowered his eyes while her father drank.

Then James coughed beyond the curtains.

“Keep him here,” she said. “He will tell us what was given, and he will help undo it.”

She went to the bed.

Her father looked smaller than she remembered.

His skin had drawn tight across his cheekbones. His lips moved around words without sound.

Delta knelt beside him.

“Father.”

His eyes opened, unfocused.

“It is Delta.”

She took his hand. It was painfully hot.

Behind her, the physician began speaking—measures, intervals, the cordial Fortier had supplied. David set his bag down and moved a basin within reach. The ordinary sounds of people trying to help steadied her.

Delta placed Fiona’s stone against her father’s chest.

Nothing happened.

She closed her eyes.

The passage had opened when she held the armory clearly in her mind. The shield had risen when she knew what she needed to protect.

Now she could feel only terror.

“Please,” she whispered.

The stone gave a faint warmth.

James’s fingers moved against hers.

“Little bird?”

“Yes.”

His eyes found her.

She bent over his hand.

“I am here.”

The warmth spread.

Delta felt the broken rhythm beneath the crystal: a heart straining, faltering, straining again. She stayed with it, listening through her palm.

Golden light threaded beneath her fingers.

James drew a deeper breath.

The physician came closer, then stopped when David lifted his hand.

“Let her work.”

Delta did not know how long she knelt there.

Her arm began to shake. The room narrowed around the bed. Each breath her father took seemed to pull strength through her, until David’s hand settled against her shoulder.

“Delta. You’re falling.”

She had not noticed.

She drew the stone away.

Its light faded, leaving James pale and exhausted, but breathing evenly.

The physician bent to examine him.

Delta tried to stand. Her knees failed, and David helped her into the chair.

“Has it worked?” she asked.

The physician listened, waited, then looked at her.

“He is stronger. I cannot tell you more yet.”

James turned his head toward David.

“Who are you?”

“David Mercer, Sire.”

“He helped me come home,” Delta said.

James watched him for a moment.

“You have my thanks.”

David bowed his head.

Outside, the council bell began to ring.

Delta pushed herself upright.

Her father tightened his hand around hers.

“Fortier?”

“In the great hall.”

James looked toward the older guard.

“Bring the chancellor here. Quietly.”

Then he turned back to his daughter.

“Tell me what you need.”

Part Seven: The Second Chance

Chapter 39: Fortier's Coup

Fortier stood below the throne.

He had chosen his place carefully. The empty chair rose behind him, making his restraint visible to every lord in the hall.

“The king remains unable to receive counsel,” he said. “The princess’s disappearance has left us without a voice capable of issuing lawful commands.”

At the long table before him lay the proposed appointment of a Lord Protector.

Several signatures already darkened its lower edge.

Others remained unwritten.

Fortier rested his hand beside the document.

“Delay now invites disorder. I ask only the authority necessary to preserve His Majesty’s realm until—”

“His Majesty has given you no such authority.”

Delta stood in the open doorway.

No herald had announced her.

For a moment the hall remained utterly still.

Then chairs scraped back. Someone spoke her name.

David stood at her right, Mathew at her left. Behind them waited soldiers of the Sovereign Shield.

Fortier’s hand closed on the edge of the table.

“My dear child.”

Delta walked forward.

“You will address the council.”

His expression softened into practiced concern.

“You have suffered a terrible ordeal. No one here doubts it. But you cannot understand the consequences of entering this chamber armed.”

“I understand them.”

“Then put down your weapon.”

“When your captain does.”

Renaud stood near the dais.

Delta had not seen him at first. Now every detail returned: the scar through his eyebrow, the hand that had lifted to command the archers, the sword entering beneath Hans’s breastplate.

David’s breathing changed beside her.

She touched his wrist once.

Renaud looked from her to him.

Recognition did not come. David was a stranger.

Fortier saw the exchange.

“There,” he said, turning toward the council. “An unknown armed man brought into the royal household. She has been manipulated. Whatever story she has been told—”

“I heard your story before I left,” Delta said. “Behind the anteroom curtain during the ballet.”

Fortier fell silent.

“You meant to poison my father, send me south, and arrange an attack on my carriage.”

A murmur moved through the chamber.

Fortier raised his voice.

“Captain. Escort the princess to her rooms.”

Renaud drew his sword.

No one else moved.

Then he shouted to the men along the walls.

“Seize them!”

Chapter 40: Beside Him

The first soldier came from Delta's left.

She raised the stone.

A curved shield flashed between them. His sword struck it, and the force drove pain through her wrist.

The barrier held.

"Behind the benches!" she called to the councillors.

David met another attacker at the aisle. His shield caught the blow, but the impact jarred his wounded arm. He stepped back, keeping the bench between himself and the man.

Mathew moved to his side.

Across the hall, the Sovereign Shield closed around the doors.

Renaud came straight toward Delta.

He knew what the stone could do. Instead of striking the light, he kicked a fallen chair into her legs.

She stumbled.

The barrier flickered.

David turned at the sound.

For an instant Delta saw the old movement begin: his body preparing to abandon his own defense and throw itself across hers.

"Hold your side!" she shouted.

He stopped.

Renaud lunged.

Delta caught the edge of his blade against her sword. The strength of the blow numbed her hand, but she turned with it, stumbling clear as the point tore through her sleeve.

David forced his attacker back.

Mathew struck the man's wrist. His weapon fell.

Now David faced Renaud.

The captain glanced at his unfamiliar stance.

“Another one?”

David said nothing.

Their blades met.

Memory offered him movements his body could not quite follow. He caught the first blow and barely turned the second. On the third, pain burned through his forearm.

Renaud saw it.

He pressed harder.

Delta moved around the fallen chair.

Her stone had begun to brighten again, slowly, weakly. She could not throw Renaud across the hall. She could scarcely keep her hand steady.

But she could see his next step.

She placed the small shield of light between his boot and the floor.

His foot struck its raised edge.

He lurched.

“David!”

David drove forward with his shield. Renaud hit the end of the council table, and Mathew knocked the sword from his hand.

The captain reached for his dagger.

Delta set her blade against his wrist.

“Let it go.”

He looked up at her.

She remembered how he had smiled in the servants’ yard.

The dagger struck the floor.

Around them, the fighting faltered.

From the doors came a voice Delta had known since childhood.

“Lay down your weapons.”

Sir Phillip Foulter stood beneath the archway, a borrowed sword in his hand and the marks of irons dark around his wrists.

Behind him, freed officers filled the entrance.

One mercenary lowered his blade.

Then another.

David remained facing Renaud until Mathew had bound his hands.

Only then did he turn toward Delta.

Blood had seeped through his dressing. His face was white with pain.

But he was standing.

She touched his uninjured hand.

This time, there was time to ask.

“Are you hurt badly?”

“I don’t think so.”

She let herself breathe.

Chapter 41: Fortier Exposed

Fortier had not left the dais.

Even now, he looked more offended than afraid.

“You have turned a council into a battlefield.”

Delta lowered her sword.

“You gave the order.”

“I ordered your protection.”

Three councillors began speaking at once.

The chancellor entered through the side door.

“His Majesty has withdrawn every authority held in his name by the Duke of Fortier.”

He carried a short order bearing the king’s seal.

Fortier stared at it.

“The king cannot—”

“I have spoken with him.”

The chancellor placed the order on the table, covering the unfinished appointment of the Lord Protector.

No one reached for a pen.

The physician was brought forward next.

His voice shook as he described the cordial, Fortier’s private additions, and the threats against his family. Delta watched him keep his eyes on the floor.

“Did you know it was harming the king?” the chancellor asked.

A long silence followed.

“Yes.”

The answer was barely audible.

The dark bottle and the prepared cup were set before the council. They would be examined by physicians beyond Fortier’s household.

Then came one of the dismissed chamber servants, followed by a clerk from the guard office. The clerk carried the original watch orders and a ledger recording payments to officers who had accepted Fortier's men.

Mathew testified to the pursuit.

He described the clearing without looking at David.

When he reached Hans's final minutes, Sir Phillip sat down.

Delta remained standing.

She told the council what she had overheard at the ballet. She repeated the plan for the southern crossing and named the men who had barred her from her father's rooms.

Fortier listened until she finished.

Then he looked around the hall.

"For thirty years, I have kept this kingdom functioning. When your harvests failed, whom did you call? When your border lords refused their taxes, who brought them to agreement?"

Several men looked away.

"I have done the work while you praised the bloodline."

"You were trusted with that work," Delta said.

"And rewarded with gratitude."

"You were rewarded with power."

"Borrowed power."

His voice cracked for the first time.

Delta looked at the unsigned appointment beneath the king's order.

There was nothing she could say that would make him see enough in what he had been given.

The chancellor called for his arrest.

Fortier stepped back as the guards approached.

At the side entrance, movement stirred.

James stood between two attendants, wrapped in a heavy robe. A chair had been brought behind him, and after a few steps he had to sit.

The entire chamber bowed.

His gaze settled on Fortier.

“I brought you into my house.”

Fortier’s face changed.

For a moment Delta thought he might answer as a cousin rather than a claimant.

Then he lifted his chin.

“And never allowed me to forget it.”

James closed his eyes.

When he opened them, he looked old.

“Take him away.”

Renaud was led out first. Fortier followed beneath guard, his titles still ringing in the herald’s unfinished announcement.

The council began demanding sentences before the doors had closed.

James’s hand tightened on the arm of his chair.

“For what they have done—”

“Let the court hear every charge,” Delta said.

Her father looked at her.

She could feel the eyes of the chamber.

“I want the record complete. The men they killed deserve more than a judgment shouted over broken furniture.”

James looked toward Sir Phillip.

After a moment, he nodded.

“Hold them for trial.”

Delta set her sword on the table.

Her hand would not stop shaking now that it was empty.

David came to stand beside her.

Chapter 42: My Love, I Am Here

The palace did not become peaceful all at once.

There were wounded men in the chapel, families waiting at the gates, and servants who startled whenever an officer entered a room. The king slept for much of the next two days. His physicians disagreed quietly outside his door, but they no longer feared who might overhear them.

Delta moved between the sickroom and the council chamber until exhaustion made every corridor seem longer.

On the third afternoon, she found David in the armory courtyard with Sir Phillip.

They sat on a low wall.

Neither was speaking.

Later, David told her that Phillip had asked about the training field, a broken wooden sword, and a horse Hans had been forbidden to ride.

“He believed you?”

“Sometimes.” David looked down. “Then he looked at my face again.”

Delta sat beside him.

“What did you say?”

“That he didn’t have to decide today.”

Sir Phillip returned the following morning.

That week, they buried Hans.

Mathew had arranged for his body to be brought from the forest once the road was safe. The silver whistle lay beside him. Phillip placed one hand on the coffin and kept it there until the prayers were finished.

David stood beside Delta throughout.

Afterward, she went alone to the grave.

For a long time she had no words.

At last she touched the newly carved name.

“You were loved,” she whispered. “Even when I could not remember.”

When she returned to the path, David was waiting beneath the trees.

He did not ask what she had said.

She took his hand.

As David’s arm healed, they worked with the stone.

They began in a quiet room with the door closed and a chair nearby for Delta when the effort left her weak. She thought of Martha’s kitchen: the table, the kettle, the window over the sink. David held the memory with her.

On the first attempt, they heard only the ticking of a clock.

On the second, a line of gold opened and vanished.

On the third, Martha’s voice came through.

“David?”

He dropped to his knees before the light.

“Mum.”

The opening would not hold long enough for them to cross. But Martha saw his face, and he saw hers. She told them eleven days had passed since they left.

Delta had counted eleven days in Vonnfield too.

It was little enough to know.

It was enough to begin.

That evening, Delta went to the courtyard behind the southern glasshouse.

Several panes remained broken. The gardeners had cleared the fallen branches but left the white roses untouched.

David stood beside the sundial.
He turned when he heard her.
“I thought I’d find you here,” she said.
“I remember it smaller.”
“You were smaller.”
“That may explain it.”
She smiled and crossed the mossy stones.
For a while they stood looking at the roses.
“The council asked about you today,” she said.
“Should I be worried?”
“They wished to know your family, your standing, and what position you expect.”
“What did you tell them?”
“That they should ask you.”
He looked pleased.
“What will you say?”
“That my mother will have opinions about my standing if I don’t come home soon.”
Delta laughed.
Then the laughter faded.
“When we can open the passage, you must see her.”
“Yes.”
“And after that?”
He turned fully toward her.
“I’d like to come back.”
She looked down at their joined hands.
“You may find this world less welcoming when there is no battle to distract it.”
“I’ve noticed the plumbing.”

“David.”

“I know.”

His thumb rested over her knuckles.

“There are things we haven’t settled. Where we live. How often I can see my mother. What it means for you to rule here.”

“I cannot leave my people.”

“I’m not asking you to.”

She nodded.

He waited until she met his eyes.

“I want a life with you. We’ll have to work out how.”

The plainness of it reached her more deeply than any vow could have done.

“I want that too.”

He drew her closer.

For an instant, with the white roses behind him and the evening light across his face, grief and happiness became almost impossible to tell apart.

She touched his cheek.

“Are you really here?”

He covered her hand with his.

“My love, I am here.”

The tears came before she could answer.

He stayed with her while she cried.

When she lifted her face, she kissed him.

Above them, wind moved through the broken glasshouse roof. Somewhere beyond the courtyard, a servant called another in to supper.

Delta rested against David and listened to the ordinary sounds of the evening.

Neither of them had to leave yet.

Epilogue: Angels in Their Eyes

By the time the white roses bloomed again, Martha had crossed the passage three times.

The first journey had left her gripping David's arm so tightly that he complained for the rest of the morning.

The second, she brought shoes suitable for stone floors.

On the third, she arrived for the wedding.

She stood in the palace guest room while Delta's attendants adjusted the last fastening of her gown.

"No one told me there would be quite so many stairs," Martha said.

"I asked for rooms on the lower floor."

"Yes. These are apparently the lower stairs."

Delta laughed, and the youngest attendant nearly dropped a pin.

Martha came closer.

For a moment she studied the white roses woven through Delta's hair.

"Ready?"

Delta looked toward the open window.

The cathedral bells had begun.

"Yes."

Much had changed in the intervening months.

Fortier and Renaud had been tried before the high court. Witnesses spoke under protection, and the records of the king's poisoning and the deaths in the forest were entered publicly. Fortier lost his titles and estates and was sentenced to imprisonment for life. Renaud would spend his remaining years under guard as well.

The physician's cooperation did not erase his part in what had happened. He was removed from royal service, and his conduct was judged separately from the threats made against his children.

James recovered slowly.

He walked first to the window, then to the chapel, and at last through the garden with Delta's arm beneath his hand. When spring came, he asked the council to prepare for her coronation.

"I should like to advise a monarch for a change," he told her. "I expect to be very difficult."

"You have already begun."

He looked delighted.

Delta was crowned three weeks before the wedding.

Learning to rule had proved less like the speeches of her childhood lessons than she expected. Much of it involved listening until she understood why two honest people wanted incompatible things.

On difficult days, she found herself remembering David's answer in the townhouse he had been repairing.

Find what can still bear weight.

There were good people left in Vonnfield. She learned to ask more of them, and to listen when they asked something of her.

The stone's passage had become steadier with practice.

It still tired her. It could not be opened carelessly, and neither she nor David treated a journey as a promise the crystal was obliged to keep. But Martha's kitchen and the palace garden had become familiar ends of the same road.

David had gone home to settle his work, speak to the people who had missed him, and spend several quiet weeks with his mother.

Then he had returned.

Now he waited at the cathedral altar.

His formal coat sat a little awkwardly across his shoulders. He had refused a ceremonial sword.

Mathew stood nearby, looking far less comfortable in polished court dress than he ever had in a scout's cloak.

Sir Phillip sat in the front row beside Martha.

Their friendship had begun with long silences and developed into disagreements about whether David ate enough.

James waited for Delta at the cathedral doors.

"You look like your mother," he said.

She took his arm.

"Will you be all right walking?"

"I have survived the rehearsals."

They went slowly.

Delta saw faces she knew along the aisle: Tomas and his sister, the stablemaster, the soldiers who had waited beneath the chapel. Beyond them sat ministers, craftspeople, visiting families, and children standing on tiptoe to see.

Then she looked at David.

He was smiling at her without trying to hide it.

At the altar, James kissed her cheek and placed her hand in David's.

David leaned closer.

"You made it."

"There were stairs."

His eyes went immediately to Martha.

"She's been talking to you."

"She has advised me on several matters."

"I'm concerned."

"You should be."

Their laughter quieted as the ceremony began.

Delta listened to the vows.

When her turn came, she spoke clearly.

There had been so many things she had been unable to say in time. These words would not remain unfinished.

David's hand was warm around hers.

When he answered, his voice carried to the back of the cathedral.

Afterward, when the bells rang and the doors opened to the waiting crowd, Delta caught a glimpse of the stone resting on its cushion near the altar.

For an instant, warmth brushed her cheek.

She turned.

Only sunlight lay across the empty space beside her.

"What is it?" David asked.

Delta touched the place where she had felt it.

Then she smiled.

"Come. Your mother is waiting."

In the years that followed, the courtyard behind the glasshouse filled with new sounds.

A boy argued solemnly with his grandfather over the rules of a wooden-sword contest. A little girl climbed into Martha's lap with earth on her shoes. David repaired the garden bench twice before admitting that it needed replacing.

The white roses kept growing.

Sometimes grief returned without warning.

A certain quality of rain would send Delta back to the forest. A song would leave David quiet for an evening. Sir Phillip still visited Hans's grave, and sometimes David went with him.

There was room for those things in the life they made.

One spring morning, Delta found their daughter kneeling beside the fountain.

A fledgling crouched in the grass before her.

“You must wait,” the child was telling it. “Your mother will be looking.”

Delta stopped beneath the archway.

David came up beside her, carrying their son on his shoulders.

He followed her gaze.

Neither spoke.

The girl looked around and beckoned urgently.

“Come quietly.”

David lowered the boy to the ground. Delta gathered her skirts, and together they crossed the grass.

Their daughter made room for them beside the fountain.

“See?” she whispered.

Delta leaned close.

The little bird was trembling, but it was alive.

The End